



HEATHER C. MYERS

Book Two in the
SWASHBUCKLING
SEA
ADVENTURES

TO
BELIEVE
A
BUCCANEER

To Believe A Buccaneer

Book 2 in The Scandalous Adventures at Sea Series

Heather C. Myers

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Did you like To Believe A Buccaneer?

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1

Isabelle Daniels headed up the stairs to the apartment she currently shared with her boyfriend Zach. She had been living with him for the past month after Izzy had—as she preferred to be called—suggested it. The two had been together for three years now. In fact, last weekend had been their anniversary, but due to Izzy's flight, they had missed celebrating it together.

Well, spring break with her family was quite lovely and fun, but she decided to head back a few days early and surprise Zach. He had been really busy with his midterms and was looking forward to spring break when he found out Izzy wouldn't be with him. She hated leaving him, but her family was quite important, especially since she rarely ever saw them. They lived in Oakland, California—Northern California.

Izzy always knew she was born to live in Southern California, like Orange County or Los Angeles. So when she was applying for colleges, UCLA and UCI were her top two choices. When she got into UCLA, she couldn't have been happier. Then, just before spring break of her second semester, she met Zach and everything fell into place.

As soon as Izzy headed into the apartment, she turned on some Lady Gaga, and began to walk around the apartment, preparing everything for that night. Izzy wasn't addicted to making love or anything of that nature, but she was particularly fond of the act with her significant other and wanted to...well, to put it frankly, she wanted to get some. It was seven o'clock-ish; Zach would be getting back from work any time now, so she had to hurry.

First thing was first: get into that cute lingerie thing she bought up in San Francisco. It was light pink, and while Izzy wasn't *that* fond of the color, Zach always liked it on her. When she saw it in the store, she just had to have it. After she slipped it on, she headed into the bathroom, and frowned at her reflection. Immediately, she released her dark blonde locks from a rather messy bun and was about to brush it, when she paused. Maybe the whole sex-hair thing would work.... Mix cute (i.e. the *pink*) with sexy (i.e. the hair).

After quickly putting Chapstick on her lips, she danced out of the room, twirling as she did so.

Next, she went to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of 1984 Chevalier wine and two wine glasses. She was about to open it with a cork screw when she realized it had already been opened. Izzy frowned, tilting her head to the side. Zach knew she was saving this for a special occasion. Oh well. Don't get upset over something silly, at least not tonight. Although, make-up sex was always good.... She shook her head. No. It'd wait.

Finally, there were candles to attend to, and for the next twenty minutes, she spread vanilla candles around the apartment, and then lit them. When she was finished, she shut off all the lights so only the flames cast a humming glow. Okay, now to position herself on the couch that exuded a saucy invitation as well as a mysterious seductress. She sat on the couch and crossed her legs, leaning forward and letting her chest tilt forward for the best possible angle of her chest. No, no. It didn't do well with her tummy. Okay. She threw her legs on the couch and sprawled out. No, she couldn't lie down because her boobs would fall all weird. It was these times when she hated plastic surgery because the women that had fake boobs would always lay down and their tits always stuck up perfectly and... Okay, no time to get upset. What if she sat up slightly, her arm resting on the arm of the couch, her other arm subtly touching the side of her thigh...? Yes, this could work. Okay, now arch the back so her boobs stuck out quite nicely, and suck in the stomach.

Wow. She must look hot. How could she not?

And yet, it was nearly a quarter until eight and Zach still wasn't here. How long was she supposed to hold this? And...

Oh my God, is that more cellulite? Shit! How am I supposed to be a sexy kitten with cellulite?!

Izzy shook her head. Okay, not the time to think about it. Zach had been with her for a few years and loved her for everything she was. Including cellulite. Of course. Okay, so it was bullshit. She just couldn't think about it now.

"Well hello, love."

Izzy's eyes snapped up and saw a man standing before her. A very unfamiliar, very disheveled, and was that him that smelled so...awful? He had dark, almost black hair that was short and yet so shaggy that it fell into his dark eyes. It was hard to make out

anything else about him, except his clothes, which were definitely not the style. Hanging on his torso was what appeared to be a tunic that was probably white once...when he first bought it. Dark trousers hung on the lower half of his body, reaching just past his knees. On his feet were tan leather boots that even in the darkness looked quite worn.

It was then that Izzy realized she probably should be scared. Some man, ten, *fifteen*, years older than she was, was standing in her living room, ogling her like she was some piece of meat. Well, it wouldn't have been a problem if it was Zach, now would it?

"Who the fuck are you?" Izzy asked, narrowing her brown eyes. Where the fuck was her intuition? On a vacation? Back in Oakland? Wherever it was, it wasn't with her, or maybe it was because her body was slow in reacting.

"You're a saucy thing, aren't you?"

He had an accent. A low, slurred, yet oddly articulate English accent. Oh. Well *now* she got it.

"Did Bex send you?" Izzy asked, crossing her hands over her chest, substantially increasing her bust line; a point this man noticed even in the darkness. She smiled a very amused smile. "Okay, I get it. You're supposed to be Johnny Depp from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, right? Well, at least your eye color is right this time. Jack Sparrow with blue eyes. Are you kidding me? Anyways... although, where's your beard and beads and dreadlocks? And your hat! He's never supposed to go anywhere without his hat. You should know better." She paused. "Now, this has been fun, and tell Bex I say she's a naughty minx, but I'm trying to get laid right now and, quite frankly, we're in a slightly compromising position. I mean, I don't want my boyfriend thinking I'm cheating on him!" Izzy laughed at the ridiculousness of it. Maybe she was suffering from jet lag. No, jet lag wasn't possible now, was it? She flew from Northern California to Southern California, not across time zones. "Anyways, you should be going. What's your name?"

The man had been peering at her quite oddly, his head taking on the familiar tilt that Izzy was used to. "Clover," he told her as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Johnny Clover. I'm quite surprised you haven't heard of me, actually. I'm quite famous... err...infamous. One of those words." He flailed his hand nonchalantly.

"Oh, you're good," Izzy said with a sly smile, and then began

chuckling. “Your *name* is Johnny. Nice. Well, this was fun, Mister—or do you like Captain? Either way, we’ve had fun, but I really must insist that you leave.” Here she looked pointedly at him, insisting silently that the joke was over and it was really time for him to leave.

“Oh, right, ’cause of the whole boyfriend thing, right?” he asked, looking at his fingernails now. “What, exactly, is a boyfriend? I mean, I would assume it is obviously a mate who happens to be male, but...”

“Okay, I get it,” Izzy said, feeling her patience wearing thin. “You’re good at being a pirate. You’ll never break your character. Blah, blah, blah... But really. Leave.”

“Well, love, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Johnny said, dropping his hand. “Actually, I don’t know what any of this is. One day, I’m sitting on me ship, smokin’ freshly rolled tobacco, lookin’ out at the ocean, admiring the horizon and whatnot, and now I’m here, in a room filled with...things that I know naught of. By the way, where’s that music coming from? And who’s singing, exactly? Because the last time I checked, it was just you and me in here. Actually, if you could tell me where I am, that would be great, love. Very helpful and all that.” He flashed her a surprisingly charming smile, but Izzy was unmoved.

“Seriously, get out of my house before I call the police,” Izzy said, bringing her legs around so they now touched the cool, wooden floor. Her eyes were narrowed into his. “My boyfriend is going to come home any second and you’re going to screw us both over if you just don’t get out of here. Look, I’ll even throw in a big tip, hmm? How about that?”

“I can’t go anywhere, actually,” Johnny told her seriously. His voice had grown even lower, which would have been quite sexy had it not been for the fact that he was a stranger in her house that Izzy assumed was bordering on crazy. “I don’t know where I am.” And drunk, obviously. Was that alcohol she smelled on him? “I only know that I was on the Caribbean Sea, about to pull into New Providence (best drinks in the Caribbean, you know) and now here I am. Though I must say, the view has gotten much lovelier.”

“God, are you hitting on me?” Izzy asked, and subconsciously crossed her arms over her chest. “Wait. Are you telling me that you came from some other...time?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Johnny said, placing both hands on his

hips. “What *time* is it here?”

“It’s the twenty-first century,” Izzy said.

Johnny clapped his hands together and his eyes lit up triumphantly. “Well, there we go!” he exclaimed. “We have it! See, I come from the seventeen hundreds, you know.”

“Of course,” Izzy said flatly, rolling her eyes. She stood, not caring that she was barely dressed anymore. She just wanted him out of the house. “You have got to be shi—”

At that moment, Izzy heard a key enter the lock and open it. There was Zach and he was not alone.

2

A very unfamiliar woman was clinging onto Zach as though she owned him. Her face was flushed, her dark hair was rustled rather messily, and her full lips looked swollen, as though she had been kissing very, very passionately. Both the woman and Izzy's boyfriend were breathing heavily, and as Izzy stared blatantly at the two of them, she realized his arms were around the woman's waist. The man claiming to be some pirate named Johnny from the past had been entirely forgotten. Was Zach...? Had they been...? No, they couldn't be... Izzy actually shook her head, trying to rid herself of those thoughts. Not Zach. Not her Zach of *three* years. No way.

And yet, what else could it possibly be?

"What the fuck is going on here?" Izzy had finally managed to find her voice, and looked between this stranger and her boyfriend, the man she had given her heart. There was a cool breeze that had blown in, causing an array of goose bumps to prick her skin. Immediately, Izzy colored from embarrassment. This was not the way the night was supposed to go. There wasn't supposed to be some random stranger in the house, nor was Zach supposed to be with *another woman*. He was supposed to come home, see her sprawled seductively on the couch, and they were instantly supposed to make love for the rest of spring break. And if it wasn't good enough (which it always was), he would have proposed.

Things never turned out the way they were supposed to.

"Who is this?" Izzy asked, gesturing at the young woman, who seemed to be looking away quite guiltily. Izzy hated to admit it, but the woman was beautiful. She was taller than Izzy, with longer legs too. She had big blue eyes, the kind that made men fall in love with a mere glance, and lips that rivaled Angelina Jolie's but managed to fit her face and not look tacky. Her body was a bit more athletic, so everything was more toned than Izzy's body. Even completely red, this woman was a knockout. How could she blame Zach for choosing this woman when she was so...

No. *Don't feel sorry for yourself. Who cares if this woman is Angelina fucking Jolie herself? There is no reason Zach should have*

gone after her.

“Isabelle,” Zach said, causing Izzy to inwardly roll her eyes. He *never* called her Izzy, despite the fact that she didn’t actually want to be referred to by her full name. It was like he wanted to appear esteemed and older, which had always annoyed her. “You’re home early.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Izzy retorted. “You never answered my question, Zach. What the fuck is going on here? What the fuck is this?”

Zach’s eyes dropped down to study his girlfriend, as though he suddenly realized what Izzy was planning. At that moment, Izzy realized that she was yelling in only her underwear and immediately tried to cover up the majority of her chest by crossing her arms over it. A rough coat was suddenly placed over her shoulders, and she suddenly remembered Johnny Clover or whatever his name was, was also there as well. God, she had to be humiliated in front of two complete strangers, didn’t she? No matter. Izzy slid her arms through the sleeves and, with shaky fingers, buttoned the coat up. She was hit with a scent of smoke and salt and something else, something masculine. It wasn’t actually a bad aroma.... The coat clung to her loosely, and reached just past her knees. She actually felt comfortable.

“Who are you to ask *me* questions, Isabelle?” Zach asked cuttingly, his sapphire blue eyes flashing at Johnny. “It would seem *we* interrupted *you*.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Izzy said with a roll of her eyes. “I just love seducing strangers who smell like cigarettes and haven’t showered in a long time, and taking them home to the apartment I share with my boyfriend who I expect will walk in at any time, and decide to fuck him anyways.”

“Hey!” Johnny exclaimed, his dark brown eyes troubled. “I resent that. I don’t smell *that* bad. Although the last bit, I’m quite open to.”

Nobody seemed to be paying him any attention.

“You never know,” Zach said, obviously flustered. “I know all the games you girls play. Maybe you wanted to break up with me but didn’t want to actually want to do it, so you staged this whole thing so I would break up with you.”

“That’s more of a guy thing to do, you tool,” Izzy said flatly. “Have you even read the *Cosmo* articles I asked you to read? And

anyways, I wasn't fucking him. I was hoping to surprise you!"

"Well, you did surprise me," Zach told her, now fumbling over his words. "Listen, Isabelle..."

Was *he* going to break up with *her*? After everything he'd put her through? He could at least give her the dignity of throwing him out.

Quickly, she pointed at the door, though the coat was so long that it masked every part of her hand save for the very tip of her index finger. "Just get out, Zach!" she exclaimed, a bit more shrilly than she originally anticipated. "And don't come back, okay? We'll sort out your things and everything later. But you need to get out! And...and..." It was hard for her to actually say it. *Three* years and this is what she had to show for it? "And we're through. We're over!" With that, she walked over to him, pushed him and his strange woman outside, and slammed the door. Izzy let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding, and on second thought, quickly locked the apartment so Zach couldn't come back in.

"Well done, love," Johnny said, making her jump slightly. He was clapping now. "Bravo, good show, and all that. I take it *that* was a boyfriend."

"No," Izzy said, shaking her head as she sat down on the couch. "A boyfriend is someone who loves you and cherishes you and respects you and who doesn't cheat on you with long-legged whores."

"I, too, noticed she had long legs," Johnny said, placing his finger on the tip of his chin as he sat down next to her. "You know, I've never seen such clothing before. If I'm being honest, I prefer your fashions to the ones I'm used to. Covers up much too much, you know."

Izzy rolled her eyes. "I'm kicking you out of the house too," she told him. "I'm just waiting to make sure Zach and his..." She couldn't come up with a better word than whore, and didn't want to repeat herself. "Well...I'm waiting until they've gone."

"You know," Johnny said, his voice suddenly very low and he scooted next to the young woman so his knee gently grazed hers, "the best remedy for this sort of...*situation*, I've found, is to release all of the emotions I'm sure you're feeling in a physical sort of manner." He coyly wrapped his arm around Izzy's shoulder, and though Izzy tried to refrain, her lips curled up into a smirk.

"So, you're familiar with love?" Izzy asked him, tilting her head up so she could get a good look at him. "You know, deep true

love?”

“‘course I am,” Johnny said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Ladies were constantly throwing themselves at me. Quite pitiful, actually, but what could I do? I was—*am*—an attractive young man! I have to give the ladies what they want. And there’s plenty of me to go around.” He still had yet to release his arm from her.

Izzy rolled her eyes once again and gave her stranger a flat look. “That’s not love, you know,” she told him.

“Well, what you have, well, *had* if we’re being technical—wasn’t love either,” Johnny told her firmly.

“And how’s that?” Izzy said, shrugging off his arm and leaning back into her couch, trying to get comfortable.

“Love is in the way you look at each other,” Johnny said knowingly, almost as though he was a teacher instructing a student. “Even when you’re mad at each other or you’re sad or whatever. When you look at someone, anyone, it makes no difference, right? But when you look at the man—or woman, I don’t discriminate—you *love*, there’s no hiding it. It’s like they say; eyes are the windows to the soul. They do say that still, don’t they?” he asked, unsure.

“Yes, they still say that,” Izzy said with a sigh.

“And for good reason!” Johnny continued. “It’s obviously one of the universal laws that still remain true today! You can’t hide love, love, at least not from your eyes. And, to be honest, you two were not in love with each other. Maybe at one time you were, but not now.” He paused, and then looked at Izzy seriously. “Now, darling, be a dear and point me in the general direction of where you keep the wine. You do have wine, don’t you?”

“Johnny,” Izzy began, giving him a look.

“Yes, love?” Johnny asked, and flashed her another one of his charming smiles.

“Get out of my house.”

3

Johnny frowned at the door that the woman, Izzy or whatever her name was, had subsequently slammed in his face. Where was he supposed to go in a place he wasn't familiar with? He had been quite overwhelmed, surveying the various contents of the place she had lived in. Devices that played music, sinks that were fully capable of providing water, and other such highly advanced technology. He turned around on the heel of his boot which caused his dark hair to litter his eyes. He quickly brushed his eyes free of the locks, and then glanced skeptically down the stairs. Then, after a moment's hesitation, began descending. When he reached the bottom, he realized he was right across the street from the beach, and smiled at the recognition. Johnny hastily crossed the paved road and walked into the sand with his boots. Even crossing different time barriers could never change the sea. The sun was setting at that moment, and instantly, he was reminded of the gentle breeze, the swaying of the waves, the sturdiness of his ship.

Johnny Clover was rarely a sentimental man, but when it came to what he longed for the most, he could not help himself. He had yet to find a woman that rivaled his first love, the brilliant, blue ocean, and highly doubted he would ever come across such a person. It wasn't as though he did not love women; quite the contrary. Johnny firmly believed that regardless of race or size, there was something beautiful about each and every woman. He was quite popular with the opposite sex, and a master of persuasion. The sea, however, continued to baffle him with every roll of her wave, every sparkle that contained her mystery. He would never tire of the sea as he did women; he would never see such indescribable beauty on a woman the way he did with the sea. There was simply no comparison, and he highly doubted there would ever be. However, this did not stop him from indulging in the pleasures the opposite sex had to offer. It was the one thing the sea could not offer: warmth. Of course he felt inside of himself a glow of pride whenever he set sail or faced dangerous peril on the open sea, but the sea could not please him the way a woman could.

The sea could not hold him the way a woman could. And yet, his love for the ocean always won out. Something inside of him hoped to find a woman he could start a family with, but he highly doubted he would find her, wherever she was.

Johnny finally tore his eyes from the horizon of the sea and glanced around him. Despite the looming evening, people were still scattered along the shore, playing in the sand, or lying on what appeared to be thick, colorful clothes. Women were barely covered, a fact that did not escape his sharp eyes, and even the men wore less than he was used to. He suddenly felt incredibly overdressed and wondered if he should take off his tunic in order to blend in more appropriately.

A loud bang caused him to jump out of his thoughts. Immediately Johnny swiveled around, just in time to catch a glimpse of a red, metal box sort of thing with wheels attached to it, heading down the paved road. It was then he noticed there were the same sorts of contraptions lined up in the street. Johnny cautiously walked over to the nearest one and touched his fingers to his chin and peered at it quite suspiciously. What, exactly, *were* these things? A few people glanced at him oddly, but Johnny didn't seem to notice them. He was too consumed by studying the thing in front of him.

After a moment of trying to figure out what it was, he took a few steps back. Now what was he supposed to do? Normally, if he was in such a circumstance back home, he would stow away onto a ship and wait for the right moment before commandeering the vessel until he made it back to his own. But it seemed that he lacked shelter, and though he would never admit it aloud, he began to worry. He reached into his pockets, trying to grip his rolled tobacco. It was then that he remembered he had given that woman his jacket, and inside those pockets were his tobacco. He wondered if that was a suitable excuse to go back to her room, and then ask her, quite charmingly, if he could stay the night.

"Johnny Clover," a voice snarled from behind him, causing him to jump once again.

However, it was not the strangeness of the voice, but rather, the familiarity of it. Wincing, he slowly turned around and was met with two startling blue eyes. Willow had always been uniquely beautiful. She was tall and slim, with long, straight red hair and attractively pale skin. Her smile was crooked and mysterious, and

freckles dotted a few points in her cheeks. Johnny believed that her heritage was Irish, but he couldn't quite place her accent, nor did she give him any clues. Details about her personal life were unknown; anyone who knew her claimed that she was some sort of mystic, some sort of witch. Johnny had no idea what she was, but occasionally, she would heal his wounded body and give him a place to stay. Despite using his flirtatious abilities, she consistently refused him, and seemed intent on trying to dissuade him from being so selfish.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. Though the two didn't particularly get along, it was good to see someone familiar in this strange land. She was dressed as she usually was, with her long hair in two braids, and a pastel colored dress on, this one blue. Her feet were bare; she was used to walking everywhere without shoes, saying it helped her connect more with nature. "Willow! How lovely to see you, dear. Just a quick question, though, if you don't mind, but where the hell are we, and why are we here?"

"Do you not remember me warning you of your selfish behavior, Johnny Clover?" she asked him in her soft-spoken voice, giving him one of her unreadable looks. "I told you that if you continued to be selfish and not learn the trait of compassion, I would send you somewhere you knew naught of. It would seem you did not listen to me."

"I thought you were joking," he told her. "Of course, this was obviously my mistake, but I am happy to inform you that I have learned my lesson and am ready to go home now." He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for her to send him back. After a long moment, he opened one eye and frowned at what he saw. She seemed to be waiting patiently for him to give her attention once more. "Well? What are you waiting for, love? No time better than the present, eh?"

Anybody else would have rolled their eyes, but Willow continued to stare at him whimsically. "No, Johnny Clover, you have yet to learn your lesson," she murmured, her voice a melody. "It is much harder here to learn such a lesson, but you will not return back to your time until you learn it. You cannot be a leader without compassion, without selflessness, and you know better than anybody that pirates such as yourself need a leader. I do hope you find what you are looking for here, my friend, but my time here now is fading. I will be back to check up on you, though."

“Wait!” Johnny exclaimed, pushing his brows up. His worry finally etched itself onto his sharp features, and his eyes focused on the sole rose in her hand. Flowers were common to see in the mystic’s palms. “Where am I supposed to go? I have no idea where I am; I know nobody here.”

“Which is why your lesson will be harder to learn,” Willow told him, and smiled that mysterious smile of hers. “But your reward will thusly be greater, and more beneficial. As to where you should go, Johnny Clover, let me remind you that it is a universal law that everything happens for a reason. I placed you at this exact moment in time for a reason. Maybe as a starting point, you should return to that place, hmm?” And with that, she completely vanished.

Johnny quickly looked around, wondering if anyone else saw what he had, but the people seemed to ignore him as the chatted amongst themselves. In fact, some people actually gave him odd looks. Apparently, what he was wearing was quite strange to them.

Well, there was no time to fix that now. He turned and crossed the street once again. His eyes lifted up to the stairway, but there didn’t seem to be any sort of change. Johnny proceeded to head up the stairs, and when he reached the woman’s door, he turned and sat down. He had no choice but to wait for her, and he hoped he wouldn’t have to wait for long.

Before he knew it, however, Johnny Clover was fast asleep, leaning against the door in this strange place.

4

The morning came too soon from Izzy's perspective. The beginnings of the sun's rays seeped through the blinds of her window, causing her to stifle a groan and turn, hoping to fall back to sleep. She knew, however, that she would not be successful concerning that endeavor; once she was up, she rarely had the talent to fall back asleep. Instead, she forced herself to get up and take a very long shower.

It was in the shower where she finally let out her built-up tears, much like a dam releasing a bundle of water due to the persistent pressure. Her shoulders bobbed up and down as her head hung down. She was sobbing now, something she rarely did, and just let the pellets of hot water hit her back. Izzy prided herself on being environmentally conscious, and she knew that it was bad to be standing around wasting water, but it was as though she was frozen; she couldn't move until her tears ceased to exist. Now, however, her sobs were dry. Goodness, she didn't remember ever hurting like this before. Finally, after another long moment, she turned off the cooling water and grabbed a towel, drying herself off before stepping out of the shower.

Izzy walked over to her sink and leaned over slightly, taking her hand and wiping the fog that had clouded the glass. She blinked when she saw her reflection. That could not possibly be her. Though she had just stepped out of the shower, her hair had already turned somewhat frizzy despite its dampness. Her eyes were predominantly red and there were bags underneath, which was probably due to the lack of sleep she received the previous night. At least there were a few more days until the end of spring break; maybe she would return to a somewhat normal state, or at least hoped her looks did. Izzy swallowed and glanced around. She had to get out of this apartment.

Quickly, she exited the bathroom with the towel wrapped around her body and threw on the first outfit she spotted: a pair of sweatpants and a black T-shirt along with cheap, Target flip-flops. Comfort was incredibly important to her, more so than fashion,

especially right now. She rushed a brush through her somewhat tangled hair, and then decided to give up and throw it in a high, sloppy bun. She didn't even want to think about make-up. After grabbing her keys, she decided to throw on an old, black hat she got at Disneyland a few years back, pulling the bill down in hopes to hide her eyes. With that, she exited the apartment, and then turned quickly around to lock the door. Once she had finished, she turned, and nearly tripped over a leg.

Izzy stood up straighter and cocked her head to the side as she pursed her lips, staring at the sleeping stranger she had encountered the night before. In all honesty, Izzy had forgotten about...oh, what was his name? Johnny, that's right. Johnny something-or-other. But seeing him there reminded her of his statement. Apparently, he thought he was from the seventeen hundreds. Right. She leaned over him, thinking she may smell alcohol on him. However, it had faded into near-nothingness, though the smoke was still rich in his clothing. Which reminded her he had lent her his jacket the other night. Maybe that was what he was waiting for....

He actually didn't look that bad, Izzy noticed as she continued to stare at him. In fact, now that she looked at him, he didn't look that much like Jack Sparrow or Johnny Depp. Granted, he was tan and he had those irresistible bedroom eyes, but his hair was darker and shaggier, and yes, his cheekbones were high, but his face was a bit more angular than Jack's. The lower half of his face held a five o'clock shadow; she highly doubted pirates (if he was, indeed, a pirate) had time to take care of his hygiene. He was taller than Jack too, about five to six inches taller, putting him at about six foot four, six foot five. And he had a bit more muscle on him. He was wearing what he'd had on last night, but at the angle Johnny was resting at, his tunic dipped and Izzy noticed a finely toned chest. And was that a scar?

"See something you like, darling?" Johnny asked with a disarming, mischievous smile though his eyes were still closed. "I can't say I'm surprised."

"Oh, shut up," Izzy said, turning around quickly in order to mask the bright blush that invaded her face. "I just didn't actually think you would be sleeping outside my door is all." She began to head down the stairs, which caused Johnny to open his eyes and spring up in order to catch up with her.

"Hey," he called as he followed her down the stairway. "Where

are you going?”

“To get breakfast,” Izzy replied, blinking a couple of times to get used to the sun before starting up walking once again. “Why are you following me?”

“I don’t know,” Johnny said, taking great care to keep up with the woman. “All I know is that I was just resting on me ship and now here I am. You’re the first thing I saw upon arriving here, and might I say, it was quite welcoming.” He smiled at her and she rolled her eyes, slipping through the crowds of tourists Balboa usually had, especially now that summer was fast approaching. Johnny cleared his throat. “Right, well I figured there was a reason I was sent to you, and I want to figure that out.”

Izzy stopped when she reached a local café that went by the name *Little Big Planet*, and glanced over at Johnny. “I’m having breakfast,” she said after a moment of hesitation. “If you want, you can join me.”

Johnny’s eyes lit up at the offer and he followed her over to a small table. The two sat down, and a waitress immediately came over and handed them menus before asking if they wanted anything to drink.

“Do you have wine?” Johnny asked hopefully, his brow pushed up.

“Don’t mind him,” Izzy told the waitress. “Just get him a coffee and I’ll take a milk, please.” When the waitress had departed, she narrowed her eyes at him. “You just can’t drink at nine in the morning. It looks bad, and it’s bad for you, too.”

“I happen to love wine, thank you very much,” Johnny responded crisply, crossing his arms over his chest. He began to people-watch while Izzy scanned her menu. “You know,” he said after a long moment, “I can’t seem to comprehend why the women here are all so...skinny.” He contorted his face in a manner of disgust. “I mean, where are the feminine curves, like yours? Did I miss something in the past three hundred years?”

“Did you just call me fat?” Izzy asked after a moment’s pause.

“What?” Johnny asked, his voice an octave higher than normal. “Now where would you come up with something as silly as that? I was complimenting you.”

Izzy opened her mouth to retort something when the waitress returned to take their order. Izzy asked for a chocolate croissant, and since Johnny wasn’t sure of the different food choices, he

ordered one as well.

“Okay, so let’s pretend that I believe that you’re from the past or whatever,” Izzy said once the waitress was gone, narrowing her eyes at him. “Tell me about your life.”

“Well, I’m a pirate,” Johnny said, throwing his arms out as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I pillage and plunder and do roguish-type things. I think I’m wanted on three different continents, and have been nearly hanged twice. The sea is my first and only love, besides of course, my ship. I don’t seem to have very many allies because, for whatever reason, many people don’t trust me, though the number of people that consider me an enemy is quite staggering. Oh, and I love women, and they seem to reciprocate the feeling.”

Izzy stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head. “Right...” she began. “Well, if you’re going to, you know, remain in this time for a while, you should probably learn how to speak to women.”

“Darling, I am surprised!” Johnny said indignantly. “How could you not think I don’t know how to talk to women?”

“Well, for starters, you don’t even know my name,” Izzy began.

“Of course I know your name,” Johnny said. “It’s Izzy. I’m not sure what it means or what it’s short for, but see? I was paying attention.” He spotted the waitress emerging from the café with their plates of food, and quickly glanced back at Izzy. “I’ll show you.” Once the waitress set down the food, Johnny gently grabbed her forearm and stared intently into her eyes. “My, err...” Quickly, Johnny’s eyes found the waitress’s nametag, and he silently thanked God for the invention. “Jocelyn. Lovely name. Anyways, I was just telling my friend here what striking eyes you have. Frankly, I’ve seen nothing like them before.” His charming smile slid easily onto his face, causing the waitress to blush. She pulled out the bill from her apron and scrawled something on the receipt before handing it to him and walking away. Johnny looked at it with interest before meeting Izzy’s eyes. “She seemed to have left me a bunch of numbers.”

Izzy leaned over and snatched the receipt from his hands and stared at it. “She gave you her number,” Izzy informed him. “It’s a good thing; it means she was wooed by your way with words. But, let me just say that the only reason she was is because of the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*.”

“Tell me, love,” Johnny said, obviously perplexed, “what, exactly, is a movie?”

Izzy stared at him in disbelief. “I uh...I have to go,” she said, shaking her head and grabbing some money out of her purse.

“Where are you going?” Johnny asked, standing up as she did.

“Um...I need to clear out my ex-boyfriend’s things from my apartment,” Izzy explained, paying the bill and then heading out of the vicinity of the restaurant.

“Well, I can help,” Johnny said with a grin, “although I’ve never really cleaned things. That was a job for me crew.”

“Right,” Izzy told him. “Look, you seem like a really nice though somewhat deluded guy, but I don’t even know you and you don’t even know me.”

“Well, that’s not entirely true,” Johnny replied, and he stopped in the middle of a crowded sidewalk and grabbed Izzy’s arm to stop her too. “I know that your name is Isabelle but you prefer to be called Izzy, and that you look amazing in the color pink. Your boyfriend is probably the dumbest man on the planet, and you are definitely not fat. And for breakfast, you like to eat a chocolate croissant and drink milk.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know what my name was short for,” Izzy said flatly, but after a long moment relented. “Fine, but you’re not coming inside until Bex and her boyfriend come inside. And if you try anything, I will call the cops on your ass.”

5

"So," Izzy began, staring at her front door. Her arms were placed behind her back and her head was tilted ever so slightly to the left. Her brown eyes quickly glanced up at Johnny, who faced the opposite direction, seemingly entranced by the cars that moved across the street. Upon hearing her soft phrase, he met his brown eyes with hers, but instead of responding, perked his brow a bit, silently asking her to go on. "For someone," she began again, looking away and down at her cell phone. She had called Bex ten minutes ago and was hoping that her friend and her friend's boyfriend, Brandon, would be here by now. They lived only a few blocks away. "For someone so firm in his claim of being from the past, you oddly don't seem too disturbed that you were sent here. And you don't seem intent on trying to find a way back."

Johnny shrugged, and gave her a look that matched his sentiments. "I miss my ship," he told her, "but the sea is the same here and there."

"I disagree," Izzy told him, turning around and facing the beautiful view of the sea her front porch provided. "The sea is always changing. The waves are never the same. The sparkles are never the same. It's always changing. The sea that you are familiar with is most certainly not the same sea I am familiar with. It can't be."

The pirate narrowed his eyes at her profile, as though he was trying to study her. He didn't expect such a subtly passionate description of the sea coming from someone here. He had been here about twenty-four hours, give or take, and he could see, though he couldn't quite understand, all the new technological advances this world had. And he also knew that while technological advances made life more convenient, they also distracted people from natural beauties. To hear her speak so eloquently about his love intrigued him. There was more to her than he first realized.

"I'm not particularly keen on going back right now," he told her. Johnny hated to admit it, but he wasn't a war-fighting-leader kind of person. He liked his ship; he liked running it, but he didn't like

being depended upon, and this upcoming war amongst the pirates and the law called for him to lead his people into battle. So when he fell into this place, he realized that Willow had answered one of his silent prayers.

Izzy rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "Whatever you're running from, be it in this lifetime or your past one, will catch up to you," she murmured.

"If that happens," Johnny said, grinning down at her, "then I'll just start running again."

"You can't run from life," she replied, and suddenly her eyes brightened, encountering her best friend Bex and Brandon.

Bex was a few inches taller than Izzy, with long red hair and pale skin. Her eyes were almond-shaped and dark brown, rivaling those of Johnny's. She was always fashionably dressed; today, she had on a fuchsia dress that reached the middle of her thighs, with black, knee-length leggings and cute beige ankle boots. Brandon had long dark hair and crystal blue eyes. He was a couple of inches shorter than Johnny, but the two men had built bodies.

"Izzy, what's up, sweetheart?" Bex asked as she made her way up the narrow staircase, with Brandon following behind her. When she reached the top, she gave Johnny a long stare before turning her attention back to Izzy. "He so does *not* look like Jack Sparrow," she told Izzy. "I mean, look at him. He has no bandana or hat, and he doesn't even wear eyeliner." She glanced over at the man who was eyeing her rather oddly. "Smile," she told him. Johnny arched a brow at her random request, causing Bex to sigh and then bat her eyelashes before saying, "Please?"

Before Johnny realized what he was doing, he glanced over at Izzy, as though he was silently asking for her approval on the matter. Oddly enough, Izzy seemed quite skillful at reading his eyes, and nodded once, indicating that it was okay for him to do what Bex had asked. So Johnny forced a smile.

"And no gold teeth," Bex concluded, turning back to Izzy. "Although, they are rather straight. You know, if he was *really* a pirate from the seventeen hundreds, his teeth would not be so perfect."

"Good genes, I suppose," Johnny interjected, hoping this woman was not filling Izzy's head with ridiculous notions.

"I can't believe you guys are even contemplating this!" Brandon exclaimed, obviously incredulous at the situation. "There is no way

this guy's from the past. It's just not possible. Yeah, he looks just like a pirate, and he sounds like a pirate, and he certainly smells like a pirate," he continued, ignoring Johnny's offended "Hey!" "But there's no way! I mean, why would he be sent here anyways? Out of all the people that could possibly benefit from being sent to the future, why him?"

"I get the distinct feeling that you do not like me very much," Johnny said, taking Brandon's pause as a moment to spring in. He was holding up his hand, his index finger extended.

"Obviously," Brandon said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, shut up Brandon," Izzy said, rolling her eyes as she unlocked the door to her apartment. "Just because *you* don't understand it doesn't mean it's not possible."

"I can't believe you're buying into this bullshit, Izzy," Brandon said as the three guests followed her inside.

"You guys, don't even start this," Bex said, closing the door behind her. "I have a perfect idea. How about while we three," and here, she motioned at herself, Izzy, and Brandon, "clear out the asshole's stuff, he can watch *Pirates*, hmm? I think that sounds reasonable. If he's really a pirate, he can point out all the mistakes in the movie, right?"

"Either that, or he's a history buff or has common sense," Brandon pointed out dryly.

"I think that's a good idea," Izzy said, turning to look at Johnny for a moment. "And if worse comes to worse, we can take him to Tina's mother."

"Oh my gosh, I totally did *not* think of that," Bex said as she covered her mouth with her palms in a form of surprise. "That's brills, Izzy!"

"God, she is just as much of a quack as this guy is," Brandon said. "Just because she predicted Izzy's breakup—"

"What?!" Izzy asked sharply, glancing over at the two.

"Oh nothing, sweetie," Bex said, waving Brandon's comment away while giving him a glare. "See, the thing is, I ran into Tina's mother a few days ago and she wanted me to tell you that you and that asshole were going to break up due to infidelity, but the same night, you were going to meet a handsome stranger who was more than he seemed."

"Well, thanks for the warning," Izzy replied.

"Like I was going to know that you were coming home early,"

Bex pointed out, her hand on her jutting hip. "And she was right, wasn't she? In fact, I think after all of this, we should definitely take him to her, just to check him out."

"You guys have fun with that," Brandon said. "But after this, I'm going home. Baseball's started back up, and there is no way I'm going to miss a game for this nonsense."

"Well, you're not invited anyways," Bex said, sticking out her tongue. She then brought her hands together and clapped. "Okay, Izzy, why don't you go set up the movie for pirate boy over there while Brandon and I start on *that guy's* things?" Before Izzy could agree or disagree, both Bex and Brandon disappeared in the room she had shared with...

She didn't want to think about it.

"What's a movie, anyways?" Johnny asked, his low voice breaking through her thoughts and giving her something to focus on. "And why is Brandon...the way he is?"

"Brandon's just an asshole," Izzy murmured, going over to her vast DVD collection. Her long fingers brushed the spines of the boxes until she found the one she wanted. "I have no idea why Bex is dating him, but then again, I have no idea why Bex dates most of her boyfriends. Anyways..." Very carefully, Izzy slid the disk on her finger and brought it to the DVD player. After a few moments, Izzy stepped back and turned on her television before flipping through the channels until she spotted the right one. "A movie is like...it's like real life, except, for the most part, the people aren't real. The plotline is imagined, and the characters are just...characters." She looked over at Johnny, her brows pushed together. "Does that make any sense?"

Johnny gave her a small, reassuring smile. "I'm sure it will once I watch this...*movie*," he told her.

"Good," Izzy said, returning his smile. "Well, just so you know, there are three of these movies, so if you like this one, I'd be happy to put on the second, and then the third." She sighed wistfully as she stared at the DVD's menu screen. "I love these movies." She paused for a moment, realizing that she had just said that aloud. "Anyways, if you need anything, I'll be in...my room. And don't pay attention to Brandon. He's a jerk."

"Isabelle," he called softly. The use of her full name was not as annoying as it sounded coming from anyone else's lips. She swallowed, pushing the thought away, and looked at Johnny

quizzically. “Thank you. For everything.”

Izzy just smiled and started the movie before disappearing into her bedroom.

6

"This movie, as you call it, is completely unacceptable in terms of authenticity!" Johnny exclaimed as soon as the credits started rolling. He pushed himself off the couch and glanced down, his eyes focusing on the two women who were both writing on boxes with permanent markers. Brandon had left about an hour ago, once everything had been officially packed. Izzy and Bex hadn't wanted to disturb Johnny, and since both were so fond of the movie, they decided to join him as they marked up the boxes.

Izzy glanced around from her sitting position, looking at the apartment. It looked so much...emptier. Not that that was a bad thing or anything. Sometimes emptiness was a requirement for closure, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt any less. Her eyes were drawn to the bedroom—*her* bedroom. Though the dresser drawers were closed, she still knew Zach's previous side was empty. All of his stuff from his part of the bathroom was gone. His Xbox 360 and all of the video games that went along with the game console were tucked away as well. Save for the boxes that now cluttered a portion of her living room, he was all but physically removed from her life. Now if only she could erase three years of memories....

"...and that bloke who was supposed to play me (because, let's face it; Jack Sparrow is *obviously* a play on Johnny Clover)," Johnny continued, flailing his arms around in obvious frustration. "How could you think he looks even remotely like me? I am so much taller, not to mention built—and I have excellent dental care, thank you very much. No gold teeth for me. And that hair is the most ridiculous sight I have seen in a long time—and I've seen a lot of odd things, let me tell you. Don't even get me started on the magic!"

"But the magic is real," Bex pointed out, her dark eyes surveying the pirate seriously.

"What makes you say that?" Johnny practically snapped, although that was not his original intention. Izzy placed her palm over her mouth in hopes to contain a mixture of a giggle and a snort, and succeeded only slightly. Nobody paid her any attention,

however. Brown eyes were currently battling against brown eyes.

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” she asked him, jutting her hip out and placing her hand on her hip. Izzy immediately recognized this as Bex’s defense pose. Once her dark eyes narrowed into Johnny’s, Bex completed the look.

Johnny opened his mouth to retort something, but after a small pause, shut it abruptly. He realized that, at least for the time being, magic did exist in the form of a tall, lanky witch he knew personally. He frowned at this, causing Bex’s lips to curl into a smirk and Izzy to release her mouth. Still, she pressed her lips together to camouflage her own grin.

“Anyways,” Bex continued, shrugging off her victory by flicking her long, red hair over her shoulder. “It’s just a movie. There are supposed to be mistakes.”

“Plus, Johnny Depp’s in it,” Izzy said, deciding to add to the conversation. She let out a pleased sigh as the pirate rolled his eyes. “That man could sit on a box and read the phone book, and I’d pay the extra five bucks to watch that movie on the IMAX screen.”

Bex chuckled as she reached down to pull Izzy up into a standing position. “Come on, now,” she said. “We have to get Johnny Straight Teeth over here to Tina’s mother. Hopefully, we’ll get this whole thing straightened out.” She glanced over at the boxes before looking back up at Izzy. “Are you going to call Zach about the boxes?” she asked as she perked her brows.

Izzy sighed as she subconsciously rubbed her forearm. “Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Let me grab my cell phone and I’ll call him on the way over.”

“Ladies,” Johnny asked as his eyes followed Izzy into her bedroom. He clapped his hands together as his brows pushed up. “What, exactly, is a cell phone?”

* * *

Johnny leaned back in the cushy seat, his face perplexed as his long fingers ran over the coarse material of his safety belt. Bex and Izzy tried to explain to him what, exactly, a car was, but they soon realized just how hard it was to explain something so familiar. Johnny, however, was smarter than they originally gave him credit for, and grasped the concept, though his fascination had yet to dim

even after fifteen solid minutes.

Dani Garfunkle's cottage was located on a secluded piece of beach, hidden by tall, thick palm trees that provided heavy shade all year round. The car slowed until it finally pulled into a parked position before the road ended and sand took over. The two women got out of the car, but Johnny wasn't sure how to free himself of his safety restraint, and after a long moment, began to feel himself panic. When Izzy realized why Johnny had yet to emerge, she smiled to herself and walked over to the backseat, opening the door. Without a word, Izzy leaned over him, careful not to touch him fully, and pushed the red button Johnny had not noticed. Like magic, the belt snapped out of its holster, and Johnny was finally free.

Once the door was shut and the car was locked, the three proceeded to walk onto the beach, the sand getting lost between Izzy's toes. It was an overcast day, Izzy's favorite type of weather, and she pulled her jacket tighter around her as the breeze pushed itself against the three moving forms. The ocean looked especially cold today, but it emitted a soothing sound as it rushed towards the shore before crashing down and then pulling back, only to do the same thing once again.

Johnny hadn't had rolled tobacco in a while, and his lips itched to taste it once again. While the two women headed inside, Johnny stayed outside, lighting one of his rolls and losing himself in his temporary euphoria.

"Rebecca!" a woman exclaimed upon seeing Bex, a brilliant smile touching her face. Dani was barely five foot, her long, curly hair swept up messily into an awkward bun. Her freckled gold eyes shone brightly, and as she moved towards the two, all of her necklaces and bracelets clinked together. "Isabelle!" She thrust her arms out, pulling the two women into a tight, familiar hug. "It is so good to see you!" She pulled back after a moment, her knowing eyes looking between both of them. "He's here, isn't he?"

Izzy pushed her brows together, tucking her chin underneath her face curtly. "Who?" she asked.

"Your handsome stranger, silly!" Dani replied, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, I assume you and Zach..."

"Yup," Bex replied. "We brought him here—"

"He says he's from the past," Izzy interrupted, her impatience

getting the better of her. She threw an apologetic look at her friend before returning her brown eyes into Dani's. "A pirate from the past. I mean, is that even possible, Dani?"

"Anything is possible, my dear," Dani told her, a mysterious smile on her red lips. "Now, where are my manners? Come, come, girls! Come sit down." The two young women followed the psychic into the living room, and Dani thrust her arms out to the couch, covered by a dark green blanket, offering them a seat. "Tea?" she asked as the three sat down.

"Yes, please!" Bex exclaimed, while Izzy smiled politely but shook her head.

Just as Dani handed Bex a teacup, Johnny entered, peeking his head around the doorframe. When his eyes found Izzy, he grinned, happy to be in the right place, and entered the house before shutting the door behind him.

"You must be our guest," Dani said, watching him as he took a seat next to Izzy on the couch.

"You smell like smoke," Izzy muttered, her nose scrunched up in disgust.

"That's probably because I was smoking," Johnny retorted, although he kept his eyes fixed firmly on the woman before him.

"Now," Dani said, her eyes looking at Izzy. "You are here because you are not sure whether or not you can trust what this man says, that he really is a pirate from the eighteenth century. Am I correct?" Izzy said nothing, but nodded once. "Let me tell you, I can assure you that what he says is true." Johnny smirked at this, feeling as though he won a battle, though neither girl paid him any mind at the moment. "Captain Johnny Clover is not of this world. He is searching for something he knows naught of, and yet...", Dani smiled her mysterious smile once again. "Yet it is staring him in the face." Her eyes then focused on the handsome pirate, and her mysterious smile slid into politeness. "He must have been sent here to pay some sort of karmic debt, and has probably hurt those who trusted him."

"How does he go back?" Bex asked, tilting her head to the side slightly. "I mean, what does he have to do to return to his time?"

Dani smiled again. "This man obviously has a lot of faults," she replied. "What man doesn't? But if he—" She looked directly into Johnny's dark orbs now. "—If *you* can find someone who loves you despite all your faults, and if you face that which you are running

from, your debt will be cleared and you will return home.”

Johnny nodded, and the three guests stood. Bex pulled Dani into a tight hug and thanked her for the tea, while Johnny nodded once. He followed Bex out the door, but Izzy hung back, her eyes worried and unsure.

“Yes, Isabelle?” Dani asked, but her eyes revealed that she already knew what was troubling the young woman.

“I—” Izzy began, but shut her mouth. “What should I do with him, Dani?”

“Of course you must do as you wish, Isabelle,” Dani told her wisely, “but I suggest you keep in mind that he was sent to *you* for a reason.” She paused and then gently cupped Izzy’s cheek into her hand. “He will not harm you, if that is what worries you.”

Izzy stood there for a moment, pondering everything she just learned, and nodded finally. Dani smiled and dropped her hand from her face. At that moment, Johnny’s head popped back in the doorway, his dark eyes searching for Izzy. When they reached her, he arched a brow, trying to mask the concern that was pooling in his eyes with a quizzical look.

“Who knows?” Dani murmured before Izzy left her presence, making sure Johnny couldn’t overhear their conversation. “He may show you things you would never have imagined.”

Once Bex had dropped the two off at Izzy's apartment, Izzy led Johnny back up into her small home, and after she had locked the door behind them both, she turned to study him. The pirate looked so out of place, it almost made Izzy smile out of sheer amusement. His clothes were dirty, with random places filled with earth, and was that dried blood? She blinked, trying not to look too odd giving him a once-over.

Johnny glanced over at the woman and saw that her eyes were watching him quite intently. He gave her a wicked smirk, and she rolled her eyes, sighing through her nose.

"Would you like to take a shower?" she asked finally, meeting her eyes with his. Johnny's brow pushed up as he opened his mouth to speak, but Izzy quickly cut him off. "A shower is kind of like a bath, except the water comes from above and you're standing up. It's a lot faster to partake in than a bath." The look of utter confusion etched out on Johnny's chiseled face amused Izzy to no end, and she had to gently bite down on her bottom lip in hopes to contain a chuckle. "Here," she said, waving him over to herself as she turned around. "I'll show you."

Johnny nodded once, albeit skeptically, and followed Izzy down the short hallway until they reached a small room. Johnny immediately recognized it as bathing quarters. There was a lavatory adjacent to a sink, and a few feet away from that was a bathtub. Johnny's eyes looked up, frowning as he noticed an odd sort of silver thing sticking out from the wall. He was about to ask what that was when Izzy bent over slightly, turning the water on. For a very brief second, Johnny was distracted by Izzy and her very nice...rear view, so to speak. However, when he heard water start to plunge out of one drain, his eyes went wide. To fill a tub back in his time, he had to have gallons of heated water brought to the tub and poured inside it. This...this was very different, very fascinating...very convenient.

"Do you like it hot?" Izzy asked, glancing behind herself to find a very entranced Johnny staring at the water coming from the tub.

“Excuse me?” he asked, not exactly comprehending the question.

Izzy blushed, realizing the question probably wasn’t the best thing to ask him knowing where his thoughts usually were most of the time. “The water,” she explained. “Do you like it hot, cold, warm...?”

“I prefer it to be hot,” Johnny said, “but not *too* hot.”

Izzy smiled at him. “Me too,” she murmured, and then turned around, adjusting the dials until the perfect temperate water came out. When she finished (and this particular part Johnny could still not believe), she pulled up a circular-shaped knob, causing the water to stop falling from one entrance and to start falling from the silver thing in beads, much like the rain. This time, Johnny’s mouth dropped open, completely baffled. “This is a shower,” she explained, standing up. “There’s soap, shampoo, and conditioner—I don’t know if you use any of those—anyways, I’d be happy to wash your clothes for you, so...”

Johnny, understanding her insinuation, immediately removed his tunic and handed it to her. Izzy took it, not quite expecting him to be so enthusiastic to strip for her, but then remembered just who it was doing the stripping. “Hold it!” she said, placing up her hand in a “stop” fashion just as Johnny’s long fingers slid into the waist of his pants, ready to pull them off. “I’m going to exit the room now,” she stated, feeling a bit awkward, her eyes captivated by the toned chest that was currently staring at her. Dark hair was sprinkled lightly throughout his it, masking as well as enhancing some scars, cuts, and even what appeared to be a couple of bullet holes. His torso was very built but not bulky, and incredibly...was there another word for toned?

“Right,” she managed to breathe, forcing her eyes to look into Johnny’s. He had that arrogant smirk on his face, as though he knew what kind of effect he was having on her. “So I’ll leave you. There are towels, and once you...once you get in the shower, I’ll collect your clothes and...well, I’ll give you some stuff to wear. Right.” She clutched the shirt to her chest, reminding herself not to look back at his body and made her exit.

Izzy walked over to the laundry basket currently placed in her room, and dropped the piece of cloth into it. She plopped on the edge of her bed and ran her fingers through the locks of her hair, her face red with embarrassment. She let out a frustrated sigh. A man literally from another world was in her bathroom, taking a

shower, and she had no clue why he was there, why he was sent to her. He seemed friendly enough, but she barely knew him, and all the drama with Zach was still prevalent on her mind, so she was incredibly stressed. It really didn't help much that he was ridiculously good-looking, and that he knew it too. Maybe it was she who had to pay a karmic debt, and had to be some mystical babysitter. But the fact that he was a pirate was pretty cool.

The young woman stood, deciding that she had waited long enough to sneak back into the restroom and grab the rest of Johnny's clothing. As she opened the door as silently as she could, she prayed that he wasn't waiting around for her, completely naked. She also chose to ignore the small part of her that hoped for the same thing. However, it would appear Johnny was indeed in the shower, so Izzy grabbed his clothes and set down an old, white wife beater and sweatpants. Both articles of clothing belonged to Zach, but it wasn't like he was around to wear them, so she didn't feel too guilty for letting Johnny borrow them.

Fifteen minutes later, Izzy had taken her dirty laundry to the apartment complex's laundromat, placed the dirty clothes in the washing machine, and headed back upstairs before plopping on the couch. Soon after, Izzy heard the water stop and after a moment, Johnny emerged. She forced herself to stare straight ahead at the blank television set, not at him, but the corner of her eyes wouldn't listen. He looked like a Greek god, glistening as he stood there. His locks of hair molded to his face, and the clothes fit him well—*too* well, to be precise. Zach wasn't as big as Johnny, so the clothes, while comfortable, were a bit tight. Not that she minded....

Wait, what?

She shook her head.

"That was...interesting," Johnny said, walking around the couch before taking a seat next to Izzy. "I feel incredibly refreshed."

"You smell a lot better, too," Izzy teased. Johnny turned his head and gave her a dry look. "Anyways," she continued, glancing away from him and clearing her throat. "So I guess you'll be staying with me for a while. There's a spare room that Zach insisted we have—though I have no idea why—where you can stay," she continued. "But just so you know, there are some ground rules." She looked at him seriously, and he perked his brow, urging her to continue. "First and foremost, no smoking inside. You can go out on the porch, but if you do, don't litter, okay? It's bad for the

environment.” Upon hearing this, Johnny’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Secondly, no bringing random girls here to...do stuff with. And you’re going to have to find some way to help me pay the rent. I’ll see if I can get you a job somewhere....” Johnny watched her intently as she tried to think of anything else. Izzy was rather cute when she was flustered. Finally, she tilted her head to the side slightly. “I think that’s it,” she murmured, snuggling back into the cushy couch. “Do you have any questions?”

Johnny pursed his lips for a moment, thinking. Finally, he shook his head and gave Izzy one of his most disarming smiles. “Actually, darling,” he said, “I suppose I should thank you. It really does mean a great deal that you’re doing this for me. I really do appreciate it.”

The sincerity of his words took Izzy by surprise, and for a moment, she said nothing. “Oh,” she mumbled. “It’s really no problem....” There was a moment of silence between the two, but oddly enough, it wasn’t awkward in any way. “You know,” she said with a sly smile. “I’ve always wanted to be a pirate. Even when I was really young.”

“Really?” Johnny asked, genuinely interested. Izzy grinned, biting her bottom lip, and nodded. “You know, piracy is more than just pillaging and plundering. It’s actually very dangerous. This... movie that I watched, it really only romanticizes it.”

“If it’s so dangerous,” Izzy began, “why do you do it?”

“Well, darling,” Johnny said, a knowing, small smile tugging his right corner lip up, “if your freedom isn’t worth dying for, what is?”

8

The next morning, Izzy woke up earlier than normal. Today she would have to go back to school. Luckily for her, she only had one class today—Sociology of Sex and Gender—and it only lasted two hours. Monday and Wednesdays were her primary work nights. She would go to class, do any unfinished homework, relax, maybe hang out with Bex if her schedule allowed, before heading into the *Skull and Crossbones*, a bar a couple of blocks from her apartment. It was in the shower when she realized that upon returning to school and therefore to work, she would encounter Zach. Just the thought of him caused her chest to tighten quite painfully, and she frowned, pushing out her bottom lip. Well, it wasn't like she was going to give up her job just because her ex-boyfriend worked there. She had to be grown up, mature; she was twenty-two, after all. Sighing, she proceeded to wash and condition her hair as she let her thoughts wander. She'd also have to see if Brian, her manager, would give Johnny a job.

Brian was a good guy, and he seemed to really enjoy Izzy's company. Plus, she was damn good at her job, and always managed to rake in the most tips any night she waitressed, so with her word backing up Johnny, she might actually get the pirate a job. Now if only she could make sure he served the drinks rather than consumed them....

Izzy stepped out of the shower and dried her hair to the best of her abilities with a towel before throwing on a pair of jeans and T-shirt. Once she emerged from the bathroom fresh and clean, she slipped on her flip-flops and grabbed her carrier bag, double-checking to make sure all of the necessary books and pages were securely tucked away. With that, she grabbed her keys and headed over to the guest bedroom Johnny was currently occupying. The door was slightly ajar, and much like the previous morning, she studied him for a bit.

The pirate looked much more comfortable on the bed than he did slumped up against her door. He actually looked quite cute, if she was being honest with herself. Though the shadows masked him

somewhat, she could tell that his lips were slightly ajar, and his perfectly pointed nose breathed in and out, creating a very soft snore. She hadn't exactly told him she would be gone for a few hours, and was still unsure if she could trust him to stay out of trouble. At that moment, her cell phone rang, and Izzy quickly stepped away from the room in hopes that she wouldn't wake him up.

"Izzy?" Bex asked, once Izzy had answered the ringing device. "Hey, so I just realized something. With all this crazy Johnny Straight-Teeth drama going on, we haven't had a good girls' night out to get over Zach and stuff."

"You know I just can't get over Zach in two, three days," Izzy said, though a touch smile crawled onto her lips. Count on Bex to always cheer her up when Izzy herself didn't realize how down she was.

"Yes, well, alcohol and dancing can help you forget about that asshole, however temporarily," she concluded, as though the argument was finished and wouldn't be further discussed. "Anyways, when is Zach coming over to pick up his shit?"

"Crap!" Izzy exclaimed, suddenly realizing why she had felt that something had been amiss. "Bex, I need a huge favor. I may have completely forgotten that I had class today—I know, stupid—and I can't be here to give him his stuff. I mean, Johnny's here and everything, but I don't want Zach to get the wrong idea. Do you think...?"

Bex sighed, tilting her head down slightly so her red hair pooled around her, much like a fiery lion's mane. "Don't I always, Iz?" Bex asked, a tiny smirk touching her lips. "Yes, I'll come over in about fifteen minutes. But you owe me. This weekend, you, I, Tina, and Sarah are all going dancing."

Izzy knew she was trapped. "Oh fine," she said, but she was content nonetheless. "Hey, I gotta go, though. I'll leave the bolt unlocked so it'll be easy for you to unlock the door. And try and get here soon. I don't want Johnny waking up to an empty house."

"You know, for someone who couldn't care less about this pirate hunk, you sure sound worried about him," Bex teased.

"Goodbye, Bex," Izzy murmured with a warning tone, and before Bex could respond, she hung up her phone, turned it on silent, and after catching one last glimpse of said pirate hunk, she headed out the door and to school.

Johnny awoke shortly thereafter. He usually woke up early back when he was in his time, reveling in the sunrise that always met him on the horizon of the ocean. When he got up, his eyes ceremoniously looked out the window. The sun, much to his dismay, was already up. He had missed the sunrise. His stomach rumbled along with that thought, and he peered down at it. Apparently, he was also hungry.

Johnny walked out of his room and into the living room, his dark eyes glancing around. The boxes from the previous day were still scattered about, and he frowned, knowing who they belonged to. He wasn't exactly sure as to why, but he suddenly became slightly overprotective of the woman who had given him so much in such a short amount of time. Johnny couldn't exactly say that he was the best candidate to promote monogamy, but though it wasn't something he wanted for himself, it was hard to see someone he genuinely liked get hurt. Isabelle—Izzy—would pretend that nothing was wrong, that everything was fine and dandy, but his eyes were sharper than they appeared, and there were times he could see the hurt and betrayal written in her brown orbs. Maybe when he returned, he wouldn't be so shallow when it came to the women he would bed....

The thought was a new one, and he frowned at it, not quite sure where it came from, exactly. However, the fact remained: he didn't like that Izzy was the one who had been hurt by this bloke Zachary, or whatever they called him. His name didn't matter.

It was such an odd feeling, actually caring about the well-being of somebody other than himself. He could admit it; usually he was a selfish bastard and came and left with the tide. He didn't really like having a big ship, for a big ship required a big crew. If he couldn't handle the ship by himself then normally he wouldn't commit to it. Johnny only liked to care about himself, which was why he wasn't in any sort of relationship, didn't have many friends, and really had no one he could rely on. It was why he chose to run away after Willow told him of what would become of him, why he outright refused the position she had said he would inherit whether he liked it or not. And yet, here he was, completely dependent on a woman in this new, scary, and yet fascinating world. However, what struck

him the most was that he didn't necessarily mind it very much.

Johnny continued to walk through the apartment, hoping to catch the young woman so they could converse over breakfast as they had the previous morning. However, the apartment looked completely empty. He stopped abruptly when he reached the door to her room. Maybe she was still sleeping...? After bringing his curled knuckles up to the door, he hesitated. The pirate didn't want to wake her up.... Maybe if he just opened the door slightly. If he saw her sleeping form still in bed, he would leave without a sound.

And what if she's indisposed? a voice asked him. Doing something you're not supposed to see.... What if she's naked?

"All the more reason to check on her," he murmured to himself as his hand began to make its way to the doorknob. "What if she needs my help getting dressed?"

Before Johnny could turn the knob and push the door open, an odd sound came from the front door. Johnny immediately straightened himself up and cast an odd glance at the door. Without even thinking about it, his right hand moved to his waist. It was then that Johnny remembered he had no weapons, no means to defend himself. Even when he first came here, Willow made it a point to have him leave his weapons behind. Well, maybe he could find something useful.... The noise at the doorway persisted once again, and Johnny's eyes darted over to it rather worriedly. Would now be the proper time to burst into Izzy's bedroom and warn her of a coming intruder? But then what about his reputation as a strong pirate?

All his thoughts vanished, because at that moment, the door started to open and Johnny had no way of stopping it.

9

"I assure you," Johnny announced as he placed his full weight against the door once he heard the odd fumbling sound persist, "though you may try, this door will not desist."

"Johnny?" the voice on the other side asked, slightly puzzled. It was vaguely familiar, and Johnny had the feeling that he should probably know this female. "It's me, Bex." Ah. There it was. "Care to let me in now?"

"And how am I to know that you are really who you claim to be?" Johnny asked, though his warm chocolate brown eyes sparkled mischievously. Bex was a very pretty woman, and if he had encountered her back in his time, she would definitely be worth getting to know quite intimately. However, for whatever reason, upon encountering this new world, his libido had lacked luster, truth be told. Not that he would ever admit that aloud, of course, but though he saw many women that seemed to favor in substantially less clothing than he was used to, he didn't have the necessary desire for any of them to actually follow through should he (or they) propose an offer.

When Johnny realized this added predicament, he spent time wondering if waning sexuality was Willow's doing, and concluded that it most probably was, just to spite him. So while Bex was definitely a beauty in her own right, Johnny harbored no such feelings to take their forming relationship to the next level. Instead, he liked teasing her as much as she liked teasing him. It would seem the two reveled in giving each other hard times and whatnot.

"Let's see," Bex replied dryly, "if you look at the door, there's this little hole that resembles a window. If you look through it, you will see it's me."

Johnny turned, though his weight was maintained against the barricade, and peered through the peephole with his right eye. There she stood, in another pink number, her hands resting impatiently on her hips and her eyes glaring at the door expectantly. His lips curled up in amusement, deciding to push her just a little further. "Though you resemble the woman I know as

Bex,” Johnny continued, “how am I to know it is really her?”

“Johnny Clover Straight-Teeth, if you do not open this door right now, I will cut off a certain *appendage* of yours and give it back to you in *pieces*,” Bex said through gritted teeth.

Johnny pressed his lips together to contain his chuckles, but finally relented. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a worried voice wondered if her threat was actually viable. “Ah!” he exclaimed, deciding not to think on that just yet. “You *are* Bex.” With that, he pushed off the door and allowed the young woman to open it.

“Har har,” she muttered.

Once inside, she closed and locked the door before dropping to her knees and looking at the boxes to make sure each one was marked with the appropriate title Bex had anointed Zach. Johnny placed his hands on his knees, leaning forward slightly to see what she was doing. “May I enquire as to what you are doing?” he asked her, arching a brow as she met his eyes.

“You know,” Bex said, pursing her lips a bit. “For a pirate, you sure do speak well.”

“I take that as a compliment,” Johnny said, grinning at her charmingly. “However, it has not slipped my notice that you have not yet answered my question.”

Bex tried to keep her face straight and blank, but the way Johnny was speaking caused her lips to curl up. However, this was not due to amusement (though he did amuse her), but due to the charm that had laced itself in his low voice and even she could not resist all of it. She wondered how Izzy was doing such a good job of it. “Ever perceptive, are we?” she mocked in the same accent, before throwing her gaze down at the boxes. “What I am doing is to make sure Zach knows how Izzy and I feel about him.”

Johnny’s eyes skimmed over a particular box with the word **ASSHOLE** in all capital letters. Underneath, there was an attempted sketch of stick figures that showed Bex doing exactly as she had threatened Johnny she would do to him. Cutting off this man’s—Johnny pulled on the neckline of the wife beater as his face contorted into a wince. Yes, the drawing was crude, but it got the point across, didn’t it? “Does Izzy know you labeled them as such?” he asked her, throwing his arms at the boxes and trying to push the horrible picture from his mind.

Bex’s eyes softened and a matching smile touched her lips. “Izzy

would never say anything like that to someone if she could help it," she said, glancing over at Johnny. "She's really one of the sweetest girls you'll ever meet. Maybe a tad cynical, but sweet nonetheless. When she and Zach got together, everybody thought they made the cutest couple. I mean, they looked good together in pictures, they loved going to the movies and the beach, and they loved learning. To be honest, I never thought Zach would do anything like this to her."

"Yes, well even the prettiest picture isn't ever perfect," Johnny said, sitting down next to her. "They were together three years?"

"Yup," Bex said, nodding. "Three years. Izzy had never been with a guy for three years until Zach."

This struck Johnny as odd. "Why?" he asked.

Bex shrugged, her brow rising as she stared in front of her. "I think that she doesn't necessarily believe in a lasting relationship," she replied. "I mean, her parents got divorced when she was young, and she never really had a male role model who encouraged her, reassured her, the usual Dad stuff. I think that she wants to believe that it's out there for her because she really is a hopeless romantic, but she hasn't found that...special someone that she trusts enough to just...let go with. And even though she loved Zach and wanted him to be that guy, he really wasn't, and she knew that." She sighed, and for a moment, the two sat in a long silence, both processing what Bex said. "What about you, pirate boy?" she asked, throwing him a sidelong glance. "Do you have someone waiting for you back home?"

"Absolutely not," Johnny said, actually offended at such a notion. Bex couldn't seem to contain her laughter at his facial reaction, and threw her head back to laugh aloud. "And what do you find so funny about this?"

"Nothing, it's just—"she said, trying to contain her amused reaction before finally getting control over herself. "Nothing, I guess I should have expected it, that's all." She tilted her head as she met her eyes, and pulled her knees close to her chest. "May I ask why?"

"I don't like being tied down," Johnny said, slightly uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "I do not want to involve myself in a relationship when everybody knows it will turn into a farce with webs of lies scattered about. I know I could never be loyal to a woman—the world has too many to offer to pick just one for the rest of your life." He paused and thought for a moment.

"Look at Izzy, for instance," he continued. "She's probably hurt by this whole break-up nonsense. Don't you think it would have been wiser for her to not have entered into the relationship in the first place?"

Bex immediately shook her head. "No," she replied. "I think that with every relationship, you can learn something new about yourself. I believe that everyone placed in your life is purposefully supposed to be there, to teach you something."

"Lessons aren't worth learning if the lesson itself was a lie," Johnny mumbled.

"You must have been hurt," Bex observed in a quiet voice. Finally, she raised her dark eyes to meet Johnny's. "And if you found the right woman?"

"I don't think there is such a thing," Johnny told her.

"Cut the crap for a second," she interjected, getting slightly frustrated. "If you found her, somebody who made you fall in love, who would be worth giving up everything for, who you would choose to be loyal for, would you engage in a monogamous relationship?"

Johnny thought about it for a long moment before finally shaking his head. "Probably not," he replied. "Even if I did find the nonsensical right woman, it would be guaranteed that one of us—although, more likely, it would be both of us—would get hurt, and because of this concept of love attached to each of us, the pain would only be greater."

Bex sighed dejectedly before a sad smile eclipsed her face. "I feel sorry for you," she told him.

"I feel sorry for you," Johnny said, troubled by her pity. "For anyone who believes in happy endings and romance and love."

"Yeah, well, the thing is," Bex said, standing up, "at least those of us who try to have a relationship have a better percentage of finding true love, true happiness, finding someone to grow old with. But for you, it's a guarantee that you'll die alone." She paused for a minute, letting her words sink in, if they *could* sink in. "Now, come on. Help me move these boxes on the front patio. I really don't want to deal with that asshole."

It took Johnny a moment to comprehend and then fulfill her request, only because he was quite startled at her blunt but true statement concerning his guaranteed death.

10

Izzy walked through the door to find Johnny and Bex arguing once again about something or other. It was becoming quite common to find the two fighting about whatever, and Izzy was becoming quite accustomed to ignoring the two. In fact, there were times when Izzy would play devil's advocate, which would just push their annoyance, amusing the young woman to no end. Luckily for her, her professor didn't give them any homework, seeing how it was their first day back.

Her eyes scanned the apartment, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips when she realized the boxes belonging to her ex-boyfriend—she refused to think his name—had disappeared. She didn't want anything of his to litter her apartment anymore. Speaking of which, she needed to get Johnny new clothes. Despite the fact that he looked good in the ones he was wearing, she wanted him to have his own sense of style. He had one when he was back in the eighteenth century; no need to change that now.

"Well, well, well," Johnny said, mid-argument, leaving a disgruntled Bex flustered in the kitchen so he could stand in front of Izzy. "So she returns. Pray tell, where have you been exactly, darling, and why would you leave me with *her*?"

Izzy pressed her lips together, trying to contain a very amused grin, but failing miserably. "I was at school," she explained as she bustled into her room to drop off her book bag in favor of a small purse.

Johnny was just on her heels, following her into the bedroom. "School?" Johnny asked in disbelief, completely forgetting his minor fight with the redheaded woman, still fuming in the kitchen. "Aren't you too old to be going to school?"

Izzy glanced over her shoulder, giving him a grin, as she removed all of her necessities from her book bag and into her purse. Instead of taking offense, her amusement deepened, and when she finished, she turned around. "Actually, you'd be surprised," she told him. "College...university...whatever you want to call it, is quite common to attend, and before you say anything about me being a

woman, it is more likely for women to attend college than men.”

“What are you learning, exactly?” Johnny asked, his fingers touching his lips. “How smart are you? The women I come in contact with—”

“No, there’s no sex class,” Izzy said, contorting a face of disgust.

“But you’re educated in the subject, aren’t you?” he teased, his dark eyes lighting mischievously.

“Oh, shut up,” she retorted, her cheeks turning a light shade of red. “Now, come on. I’m going to try and get you a job tonight, but I can’t exactly introduce you to my boss when you look like...” She glanced at him and made a face. “We need to get you new clothes. I have some money I’ve been saving up, so I can lend you some money to get you three or four outfits. You can always pay me back later.”

Johnny placed his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth on the heels and balls of his feet. “You trust me that much?” he asked her, not sure what to make of her offer.

“Should I not?” she asked, turning around to look at him. He didn’t say anything, really, just gave her an unreadable expression, so Izzy turned and headed out the door. “Bex,” she called before heading into the kitchen. “I’m taking Johnny to South Coast to get him some clothes. Do you wanna come?” Her brow perked as she regarded her friend patiently.

“Absolutely,” Bex said as a dangerous smile slid onto her face, and her dark eyes narrowed resolutely. “I want to take pictures.”

* * *

Izzy drove everybody to the South Coast Plaza mall, ordering Johnny in the front seat of the car and Bex in the back. If anybody opened their mouth to fight, Izzy would just turn the radio up louder. Luckily the two were smart enough to get Izzy’s point, and the drive was mostly silent (save for the radio, of course) and tense. It took about fifteen minutes to reach the mall, and unsurprisingly, the parking lot was nearly full.

“Where should we take him?” Izzy asked Bex, once the three exited the car.

“Sears, JCPenney,” Bex said, shrugging.

“Ladies, might I interject,” Johnny began, coming over to stand

between the young women. “But what, exactly, is this place and why are we here?”

“Okay,” Izzy began, already preparing her answer. “You know how in Port Royal there’s a downtown section with numerous shops that sell different products?” Johnny thought about this and nodded slowly for a moment. “Right, well this is like that, except it’s much more condensed.”

“And much more expensive,” Bex put in with a roll of her eyes. “Oh, you know what?” she asked a bit more seriously. “We should probably warn him...” She looked over at Johnny. “Now, I don’t want to inflate your ego or anything, but you kind of look like the guy from the movie you watched. His name happens to be Johnny Depp. People may actually come up to you, girls may throw themselves at you, but you need to remember that you are not that man, so just say no to everything.”

With that, the two led Johnny into the mall. What a sight it was for the pirate captain. An assortment of different people in different clothing littered different places of this “mall,” talking and laughing, buying and returning. There were a bunch of different shops, serving food, clothing, and home décor. As Johnny followed the two women, he couldn’t take in everything fast enough. His mouth was hanging slightly open, and his dark eyes were shifting left, right, left, right... He was so consumed in everything that was going on around him that he didn’t notice people gaping at him slightly, whispering amongst themselves, while some actually pointed at him. Bex actually snapped at one woman, saying that this guy was most definitely *not* Johnny Depp because Johnny Depp was much hotter. Duh.

“Okay,” Izzy said, once they entered Sears and made their way to the men’s department. “I and Bex are going to help you get some clothes. Just tell us what you like, okay? And I think it would also be best if you got one nice suit or something. You never know when—if—you’re going to need it, and it’s always good to be prepared.”

For the next two hours, the three entered the men’s department and began picking up T-shirts, jeans, underwear, socks, undershirts, everything they could get their hands on. They made at least six trips to the changing rooms, where Bex made sure to take multiple pictures of Johnny when he was least expecting it. When Johnny actually caught the redhead, Izzy had to explain what a camera was. Johnny was so fascinated by the technological device that he

wasn't upset. When Bex showed him the pictures she had taken with her digital camera, Johnny smirked.

"I do look pretty good, don't I?" he asked.

"Come on," Izzy said with a roll of her eyes. "Let's get you a nice suit, hmm?"

It took the trio another half an hour until Johnny was adorned with a nice suit. The pants he was wearing were a very dark gray and a royal blue silk shirt encompassed his torso quite nicely. Even Bex had to admit that the guy could definitely wear a suit. However, Johnny himself was quite frustrated with the buttons he was currently trying to button with his long fingers. It would seem that the little buggers didn't want to slip through their designated holes and just... *stuck*! It was now that he missed the clothes he was accustomed to back in the eighteenth century. Could this be the message Willow was trying to teach him? Don't take your clothing for granted?

However, his thoughts and frustrations suddenly disappeared when Izzy walked over to him and began to button the silk shirt up. Johnny took this time to study her without worrying about getting caught and then reprimanded by her. Her calm brown eyes were focused on him, and he could tell she was trying to keep her fingertips from accidentally grazing his bare chest. Normally, he would have made a witty innuendo, but he couldn't seem to open his mouth to speak. His eyes were locked onto her face, tracing every curve, every inch of her with his mind. She was naturally beautiful, and did not need the aid of powder, rouge, or coal like many of the prostitutes he had known. Her lips were full, and he noticed the edges of her teeth graze her bottom lip, indicating that she was deep in thought. Her small, upturned nose was centered, splashes of freckles caressing the tips of her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. He wanted to kiss her, if nothing else.

A flash distracted both of them, and they turned, both gazing at Bex standing there, looking at her camera with an unreadable expression on her pretty face.

“So then, darling,” Johnny said, turning to Izzy once Bex had taken her leave and the two were back at the apartment. His dark eyes were scanning his cuticles, finding it odd that after twelve hours, his nails were actually quite clean. It wasn’t exactly something he was used to. However, when he grew weary of his subject, he looked over at Izzy, who was regarding him with an expectant stare. “Right. What is the plan for the rest of the day? Sleeping? More shopping? Or something a bit...” He took a step towards her as his lips tugged up in a mischievous grin. “More...” Another step and now he was in front of her. He leaned down and whispered, “*intimate.*”

“Oh, yeah right,” Izzy said, rolling her captivating brown eyes, but Johnny skillfully noticed the nice red shade currently overtaking her lovely cheeks. “I don’t think so, bub. Here’s what’s going to happen for the rest of the night. You need to get changed into a T-shirt and jeans—remember what jeans are?” His look turned somewhat sour at her sarcasm and he crossed his arms over his chest before nodding once. “Oh, and try and maintain your hair somewhat. I’m going to try and get you a job at the bar where I work. You need to look presentable, but you know...” Her eyes skimmed over his ever-prevalent five o’clock shadow and she smiled slightly. “But not too presentable. It is a bar, after all.”

“A job?” Johnny asked, taking his index finger and tapping his chin as his lips pushed into a frown. “And what will I be doing at this job, pray tell?”

Izzy shrugged. “I assume cleaning up, kind of like a busboy or whatever,” she murmured. As Johnny studied her, he could tell she was somewhat tired, indicating that she probably wasn’t getting a lot of sleep during the evening. “But whatever it is, someone will train you and if you learn quickly, everything will be easy for you.”

“And you are quite certain I will get this job, yes?” Johnny asked, concealing the slight apprehension in his chocolate-colored eyes. He would never admit it aloud, but there was a certain worry that had overtaken his mind. If he happened to not get the job, did

that mean Izzy would kick him out to find someone more suitable to help her with finances? Who more suitable than him, though? And if that did happen, what did that say about him as a man? Not very much, he gathered.

“Brian can be very unpredictable,” Izzy responded after a long moment, wondering the same thing, “but I’ve been working there since I was nineteen, on and off, so I know that he trusts me and my judgment. I think most likely you will, Johnny, so there is nothing to worry about.”

“I was not worried,” he said quickly, causing Izzy to smile as though she knew better, and knowing her, Johnny suspected she already did. “Well, then. I will get dressed now and meet you in the kitchen.”

Izzy nodded. “Sounds like a plan,” she agreed.

* * *

Johnny emerged from his bedroom fifteen minutes later. Izzy had already changed and was waiting for him on the couch. When she heard his bedroom door re-close, she stood up and turned around. Seeing him caused her brow to push up and her mouth to slacken just a bit. If he had looked like Johnny Depp in sweatpants and a wife beater, he looked even more like the actor in jeans and a nice, dark T-shirt. The only couple of differences, of course, were the fact that Johnny the pirate was taller and more built. His shaggy hair framed his face, and his dark eyes looked into Izzy’s, almost as though he was searching for some kind of approval. He wasn’t used to such clothing, and felt rather silly in these. Izzy was sure that if their places were reversed and she was wearing a corset-clad gown, she would feel just as he did now. A smile shone on her face as she took him in, and she nodded her head. Now, she just needed to make sure that everyone who worked with her believed he wasn’t Johnny Depp, but Johnny Clover.

The walk to the bar was quick and entertaining as Izzy told Johnny of her co-workers, along with amusing stories. Since she had worked there for four years, she had plenty to tell, and Johnny, for whatever reason, found that he could not stop listening to her if he tried. The way her voice sounded, the way her eyes shone, the way her lips moved...her actions was subtly hypnotic, and Johnny

would wager the clothes on his back that she was not aware of how she affected anybody who watched her, who interacted with her.

The bar itself was rather small, but it was always packed with the usual college kids, tourists, and usuals. Johnny immediately recognized the similarities between this so-called bar and every scrag he had frequented back home. Music was playing from a jukebox, and as usual, all the pool tables were filled. Izzy looked around for any employees; from what she could see, Brian was manning the crowded bar, while an acquaintance, Brittany, was serving those who chose to sit at tables rather than stools.

"Brian!" Izzy exclaimed once she had led Johnny through the crowds of people, pointedly ignoring the pirate's incessant questions about where the music was coming from and what game the people were playing on those funny tables.

"Ah, Izzy," the man said, obvious relief flooding his features. "I'm glad you're early. Sam called in sick not ten minutes ago, and she was supposed to have stepped in now. Do you mind working earlier than scheduled?"

"Not at all," Izzy said before grabbing Johnny's wrist and pulling him forward. "Brian, this is my friend Johnny. He's staying with me for a portion of time, and I was wondering if he could work here for a while. He's a quick learner and knows a lot about alcohol. Plus, with a face like that, he's sure to rake in a lot of tips."

"You like my face, love?" Johnny asked, looking down at her. He was somewhat surprised at her casual omission, but pleased nonetheless.

"English, too?" Brian asked, looking him with squinted blue eyes before fixating his gaze back on his employee. "You know who he reminds me of?"

"Yes, Bry, I think I do," Izzy said with a knowing grin. "But I can guarantee you that he is absolutely not that person. His name is Johnny Clover, and uh...well, he's staying with me."

"What does Zach think about that?" Brian asked.

"Zach and I broke up," Izzy said. "But before you ask anything Brian, yes, I am all right, and no, you don't have to fire Zach. If anything, I would appreciate it if you could give Johnny a job so he could help me with rent and whatnot." She pushed her brow up as her eyes widened slightly. "Please?"

"Yeah, yeah," Brian said after a moment. "Sure. He can be a busboy. I need you to get on tables and help Brittany out. I'll train

the kid.”

“I am *not* a kid,” Johnny put in firmly.

“You got it,” Izzy said with a grin before looking back up at Johnny. “It’s an expression, Johnny. No need to get offended. Now Brian is going to be helping you learn what you’re going to do, okay? I’ll be waiting tables, if you have any questions.”

With that, she headed into the back, leaving Johnny alone with Brian. Suddenly uncomfortable, Johnny slipped what he hoped to be a very charming smile at his new employer, but Brian didn’t seem as moved by it as women usually were.

“I don’t know how you know Isabelle,” Brian began, his blue eyes hard as diamonds. “I don’t really want to know. I’m not exactly sure why she and Zach broke up. Again, I really don’t want to know. I never liked the kid; only hired him because Izzy liked him. Now listen, and you listen good.” As he said this, he stuck out a threatening index finger, and waved it in front of Johnny, his eyes pointedly intimidating. “I’m not sure what relationship you and Izzy are in, if you’re even in a relationship. I don’t know why she’s letting you stay with her. Again, none of my business. What I do know is that if you hurt her in any way, if you break her heart, I will break your neck. You got that?”

Though Johnny was a good half a head taller than Brian, and was no doubt stronger than the old man, Johnny was definitely (and rightfully) intimidated by him. “Yes, sir,” he said in a breathy manner. He swallowed, and then smiled once again.

“Good.” Brian’s nod was curt, and he glanced down at the bar before nodding at Johnny. “All right, c’mon back here, kid. Izzy said you knew a lot about alcohol. Before we get into your official duties, why don’t you come over here and show me what you know, hmm?”

12

Johnny's eyes followed Izzy as she interacted with the customers and as she served them the oddest (albeit very delicious smelling) food he had ever seen. She had the brightest smile he had ever encountered because it was so genuine. The lasses back in his day were known for their deceptive nature, their guarded eyes, their tight smiles. To give them credit, he knew that there were times when people needed to be that way; he usually was.

But this woman was so different from that. He had no idea about her life, save for the fact that she lived on what was known as Balboa Island, recently broke up with her ex-boyfriend, and went to school. That, and she looked absolutely radiant in her pink underclothing.

Johnny smiled at the memory of her, sitting there so expectantly in barely anything at all. With her wild hair falling down her back much like an untamable waterfall, and those brown orbs of hers filled with brimming sexuality, she had to be one of the most alluring women he had ever laid eyes on. Freckles were scattered across her cheeks and the bridge of her small, upturned nose, but she made no move to cover them. He found that he liked it; it was natural and refreshing. Her body was definitely something to brag about. She had a graceful neck, feminine shoulders, and the curves of an hourglass. Her breasts were quite impressive, her stomach was flat but curvy, and her legs were long for her five foot five frame; strong as well.

God, she was beautiful, more so than she even knew. He found this quite surprising because he was obviously good-looking, and used his charm, wit, and attractiveness to get what he wanted. Again, she was different in this respect because instead of wearing clothes that enhanced those curves he had seen on their first meeting, she hid them quite purposefully. Her beautiful golden hair was pulled back quite casually into a high ponytail, with errant strands falling all over and framing her heart-shaped face. She wore a tunic (T-shirt?) that was slightly formfitting, but was far from low-cut. The denim pants she wore, however, were cut low and fit

her wonderfully, revealing the wonderful curve of her backside. She may not have known just how gorgeous she was, but he could tell she knew how to move her body. With every step, those hips of hers swayed to the side, and...

"It's easy to fall in love with her, isn't it?" a voice asked from beside him.

"Yeah," Johnny replied absentmindedly, before furrowing his brow and glancing at the bar manager. "Wait, what? Love? Forgive me for saying, mate, but love is not exactly the word I would use."

"Oh yeah?" Brian asked, pushing his brows up. "You're not a fan of the emotion?"

It had been an hour, give or take, since Izzy had brought him here, and as she had told Brian, he was definitely a fast learner. He was successfully helping Brian serve drinks at the bar, and yes, he had been asked if he was Johnny Depp, the movie star. Of course he wasn't. And here he thought it was so bloody obvious.

"Not particularly, no," Johnny replied airily, mixing another drink he wasn't exactly sure the title of. They all had the most random names he had ever heard—a Cosmo-whatever, Sex on the Beach (now that, he would definitely be up for), a Screwdriver—he just didn't understand. However, he was good at memorizing what alcohol, juice, and ice went where, and because of his quickness, he was rewarded with money. "Tips," Izzy had called them.

"May I enquire as to why?" Brian asked, gathering some beer from the tap in a glass mug before shooting Johnny a sideways glance.

"Love is a commitment," Johnny said, handing the drink to the waiting patron before starting on another one. "Love is depending on somebody for happiness. Love is monogamy." He physically shuddered at such a thought and shook his head, causing his dark hair to move along with him. "Love is pain, anger, and at moments, passion. But passion can be found anywhere. You do not need love to have passion, and at this point in my life, passion is all I'm looking for."

"I see," Brian said after a moment, studying the man next to him. Johnny looked as though he actually meant every word he said, and Brian sighed, before patting his new employee on the back. "Well, Johnny, then I feel sorry for you."

"Really?" Johnny asked, generally intrigued as he grabbed a glass mug from behind the bar before looking over at the older man

with his dark gaze. "And why is that?"

"You look at love in the wrong way," Brian told him, mixing another drink. "You see, love is just a word that describes all the feelings that we're feeling when we strongly like a person. There is no definition to the word, except the one you give it. So if you truly believe that love is what you say, then it's no wonder you stay away from it. But remember, you can always change the definition so you're more open to it."

"And what is love to you?" Johnny asked him, giving the man a pointed but polite stare.

Brian smiled at this, glancing down at his left hand where there was a single golden band on his ring finger. "Love is..." He paused as he furrowed his brow before tilting his head and then trying again. "Love is..."

"Love is money," a voice interrupted, causing both men to look over at who had spoken. She was wearing the same T-shirt as Izzy was, except she had tightened it, and redesigned it, so the back wasn't cloth at all; only lace that crisscrossed and held the shirt together occupied her long back. She had dark blue eyes and deep, burgundy hair. Her pants were tight leather, and she had on some sort of boots. If Izzy was beautiful, then this woman exuded sexuality. "Love is sex." She walked behind the bar and up to Johnny so that she was inches from his frame. "I'm Candace, but everyone here calls me Candy."

"Johnny," he replied, a tiny smirk tugging the corners of his lips as he placed his hand in hers. He immediately recognized the look her eyes were giving him. Apparently, she was just as fond of sex as he was. Her blue eyes were cool, much like glaciers, as she looked at him with such obvious interest.

"You do look like a Johnny," Candace murmured in her velvet tone. She released his eyes, tilting her head to the side to give him a better view of her chest. Of course, Johnny being the man that he was, took this opportunity to study what was before him, and after a moment, frowned a bit. Though the woman seemed to know what she was doing sexually, her body lacked the feminine curves that Izzy had.

"Candace," Brian said, the only one who didn't address her as Candy. "I'm glad you're here. I already trained Johnny, and he is a quick learner. But I need you to take over the bar while I go count receipts."

“You got it, boss,” Candace said, giving him a mock-salute as Brian disappeared into the back. She smiled flirtatiously at Johnny. “So I guess it’s just you and me.”

Another couple of hours passed by, and Candace spent the majority of them shooting innuendos and sexual comments his way. Johnny flirted back, of course, and found himself enjoying her company...up to a point. He was a smart bloke, and knew, if anything, this woman was the female incarnate of himself. While he liked the qualities in her that he admired about himself, he found the conversation was lacking something, although he wasn’t quite sure as to what. And even though she seemed to get much attention from the patrons sitting at the bar, Johnny felt himself grow bored and his eyes began to search the bar for Izzy. He couldn’t quite explain it, but she was interesting to him, and she didn’t have to say anything. Currently, she was laughing at something one of the patrons said to her as she took their order, and he couldn’t help but allow a tiny smile to touch his lips.

At that moment, Zach appeared at her side, and Johnny felt his body tense and his dark eyes narrow of their own accord. He intricately watched as the two interacted, and for the first time that night, he noticed a clear, fake smile touch Izzy’s lips. It was obvious to see that she was trying to be cordial, but there was a pain that flashed in her eyes, and once again, Johnny felt himself frown. Oddly enough, it would seem that he really did not like to see the woman hurt.

Almost as though she knew he was watching her, Izzy lifted her eyes to Johnny, and when they met, she gave him a smile and an inquisitive look. He read it clearly—was he okay? He nodded and gave her a small smile in return, and nodded at her with the same questioning look—Are you? Izzy’s smile widened, touched that he took notice, but she nodded and then turned, heading back to take more orders.

So many emotions were swirling in the pirate; many he had never felt before and many he never wanted to feel. He couldn’t quite understand it. He had a willing, and very good-looking woman standing next to him, just waiting for him to say the word and she would give herself to him. And yet, he couldn’t get the other woman, the one he probably had no sexual chance with at all, out of his head and away from his thoughts.

13

The night was a lot more fun than Johnny had originally anticipated. It was interesting to learn the many different ways to mix different drinks, and he decided that when his shift (as he learned it was called) ended, he would try some of those new drinks, though wine was most preferable for him. Brian was quite an interesting character; there were times when Johnny thought Brian might reprimand him for something (such as his charming behavior), and other times, he felt as though maybe he and Brian might have the opportunity to actually be friends. The older man was very dry with his wit, and anybody could tell how protective of Izzy he was, looking after her much like she was his own daughter. As Johnny watched their interaction, he felt some unfamiliar feeling stir inside of him, and as he continued to think on it, he realized that he wanted to have that sort of relationship. He had never really thought of having kids. In fact, he had been fully against it; if he thought women might depend on him, then having children would surely tie him down, hook, line, and sinker. And yet...well, maybe if he found the right woman.

Did you just say that you would give monogamy a try, Johnny Clover? a very surprised voice inside Johnny's head asked, almost appalled at such a notion.

Johnny pointedly ignored a question, and shifted his glance to the young woman next to him. Candy, as she had told him to call her, could be quite the little minx when she wanted to be, and she was also a coy distraction. But Johnny had been around the block a few times, so to speak, and as a result, he could see through her many accidental touches and her subtle (and sometimes very blatant) innuendos. Not to say that he didn't enjoy this sort of attention. It had been a few days since Johnny was properly fawned over by a member of the opposite sex, and luckily for him, Candy was pretty as well as obviously experienced in matters of a sexual nature. He wouldn't mind having a little fun with her....

But is she the right woman? another softer, logical voice asked.

Johnny actually shook his head at such a thought. He may have

been more open to having children, but that didn't mean he wanted them *now*. No, he decided, she probably—most definitely—wasn't the right woman when it came to that aspect, but he knew he could potentially have a lot of fun with the wrong woman.

It was two o'clock in the morning when the bar closed, and Brian went in the back to count inventory and money while his employees cleaned up the floor. Candy was teaching Johnny how to wash mugs, where to place them when they were dried, and what to do with the liquor. At first, he watched her and followed her directions, but then Izzy walked out from the back with cleaner, a couple of wash rags, and what appeared to be currency of some kind.

Candy followed his gaze before glancing up at him. "It's her turn," she explained softly. Johnny glanced down at the woman, his brow furrowed. "Every night when we close, somebody gets to be in charge of the jukebox so we get music when we clean up."

Johnny watched with absolute fascination as Izzy slipped the silver coin into an oval-shaped machine and extended her long index finger in order to press two white buttons. Within moment, a steady beat filled the bar and soon, a singer started singing.

Candy rolled her blue eyes, but a small smile was on her face. "She always chooses this song," she murmured.

"She loves dancing to it," Candy continued, but Johnny couldn't hear her. His dark eyes were focused on the woman out on the floor, simultaneously cleaning and dancing along to the song. Her moves weren't provocative, but they were slow and sensual, and he could instantly tell how moved she was by the song. Her eyes were closed and the edges of her lips were curled up in an enjoyable smile on her face. She was completely lost in the melody, and he couldn't help but watch her.

Izzy was simply mesmerizing.

* * *

"So how did you like it?" Izzy asked Johnny as the two headed out into the cold night. She bundled into her nice, warm hoodie as she glanced up at him from the corners of her eyes.

"That woman, Candy," Johnny began, pulling out a slip of paper, "gave me a slip of paper with a bunch of numbers on it,

similar to that of that lovely waitress we encountered while we were breaking our fast.”

Izzy snatched it out of his hands, and using the street lights, saw that it was, indeed, Candy’s number. She rolled her eyes and handed it back to Johnny. “Well, there’s a surprise,” she muttered.

Johnny instantly picked up Izzy’s sarcasm, intricately webbed through her usual cheerful tone. He glanced down at her. “And why do you say that, darling?” he asked her.

“Because she gives everyone her number,” she said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “When Zach and I first started going out, and people who worked with us *knew* we were together, she still hit on him—err...charmed him? —practically right in front of me. Zach knew better, though.”

“Says you,” Johnny said, not realizing the effect he had on her. “Who knows what went on without your knowledge, hmm?”

Izzy glanced up sharply at him. “Oh, that’s right,” she murmured. “You would know, wouldn’t you?”

“Now don’t get upset with me, love,” Johnny said, instantly able to read the offense she took clearly on her face. “My lifestyle is just different from yours, is all.”

“I just don’t understand though,” Izzy said, genuinely concerned as she gazed at Johnny’s profile, hoping to catch some sort of tell. “How can you do it?”

“Do what?” Johnny asked, stopping for a moment. Izzy positioned himself in front of the pirate, and Johnny tilted his head to the side, causing locks of hair to fall into his face. She might have studied how beautiful he was, had it not been for the serious subject they were talking about.

“I mean,” she said, her face reddening due to the personal experience. Luckily, the night easily masked this, though Johnny could clearly see the way her brown eyes turned rather glassy. He frowned at this; he didn’t like seeing her hurt, especially if it was because of him. “How could you knowingly hurt somebody? How could you pretend you love somebody, and then turn around and say the exact same thing to another woman? Haven’t you ever been in love?”

“Absolutely not,” Johnny said, completely affronted at such a notion.

A sad smile touched Izzy’s lips, and her eyes swept over to the ocean, calmly rolling to the shore before being pulled back into the

ocean, only to be pushed back to the shore. "So you wouldn't understand," she said simply before crossing her arms over chest and turning back around.

"Understand what, exactly?" Johnny asked, placing his hand on her shoulder and turning her around. His eyes immediately locked with hers and she tried to read them. However, it was almost as though they were speaking two different languages, because what he saw in her golden orbs, he couldn't quite decipher.

"You've never been in love," Izzy tried to explain, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You wouldn't understand what it's like being hurt by somebody you love. You wouldn't understand what it's like being completely overwhelmed by one person, willing to do anything for their happiness, willing to die for them, knowing they would be saved. You wouldn't understand because you've never experienced it." She paused and gave him an even stare. Finally, she sighed. "If you're just looking for fun without any sort of commitment, then Candy would definitely be the person to call. But if you're actually willing to let yourself fall in love, if you're willing to understand that what you do to other women actually have consequences...? You may not understand, but it hurts. Imagine your heart being ripped straight out of your chest and then being chopped up into a million pieces."

"That much, eh?" Johnny asked, wincing a bit.

"Try ten times worse," Izzy replied firmly. "It's the worst kind of betrayal."

"Then why would I ever want to fall in love?" Johnny asked her. "Especially knowing that there is a chance that I could get hurt?"

"Because it's the best feeling in the world," Izzy said with a nostalgic sigh.

"I highly doubt I will ever understand the concept of love, darling," Johnny said, scratching his head.

"You will," Izzy said as the two began to start walking again. "Once you find the right woman."

It had been three weeks since Johnny's debut in the New World, as he liked to refer to the twenty-first century. The trio that consisted of Johnny, Izzy, and Bex were at a table in a casual restaurant called Islands, waiting for their orders to arrive. Johnny was absolutely fascinated with the layout design that resembled Hawaii. Izzy had insisted that Johnny try a good cheeseburger, and not the ones from their work either. So there they sat, chatting about pointless things but having fun nonetheless.

In the three weeks since Johnny had gotten there, he and Izzy became quite close. The pirate had yet to actually call her "friend" aloud, but he felt the attachment he had with her, and remarkably, it wasn't as bad as he once thought. Even Bex the Minx, as he called her after she ridiculed him with the whole Johnny Straight-Tooth name, was slightly growing on him. However, he especially liked the times when it was just Izzy and him. She taught him so much about this new and fascinating world, and he always seemed to have a really good time with her. He also loved watching her dance, whenever they closed up the bar.

Speaking of which, he was quite the bartender now. Many more women started coming and requesting that he serve their drinks and whatnot, and even though he reassured them that no, he was not this Johnny Depp character, they didn't seem to care. Many people requested pictures with him, and he happily obliged. He got lots of money in tips, and after Izzy had taught him how this currency worked, he started buying things for himself, helped with the rent, and even opened a bank account.

As he sat back thinking about this, he realized that he wouldn't be as comfortable here as he was now without Izzy. Subconsciously, he began to gently gnaw on his bottom lip as his brown eyes flicked to the woman who was currently sitting next to him, taking a sip of her milk. Yes, he definitely considered her a friend; a very close one, in fact. He didn't know what would be of him without her, and though this new relationship between them scared him, he was ultimately grateful for it. If anything had happened to her... Well,

he didn't even want to think about such notions.

Johnny turned his head slightly so he could look at Izzy's profile from a different angle, taking in everything about her. She was unlike any woman he had ever met. Her beauty was quite natural, and it was easy to tell that it spread inside her as well as outside. He noticed many things about her that he seemed to have no trouble remembering, whether it was that she liked to wear her hair down most of the time, even though she had a striking face. Her favorite color was green. She loved to read, which amazed him to no end because many women from his time were barely able to learn anything, let alone enjoy reading. She did not like wearing make-up unless it was a special occasion because she hated taking the time to take it off. And she loved that song, "Come Together," and as a result, loved to dance to it. He loved watching her dance. Come to think of it, he loved watching her do a lot of things....

"So," Izzy said, turning to face him. Her eyes emphasized the delighted sparkle in the brown irises and he found himself staring at it as she asked her question. "How are things between you and Candy?"

"Who?" Johnny asked, frowning a bit as his brow furrowed.

"Oh, ew," Bex said, rolling her dark eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. "You have a thing for Candy? That's just gross. You do know there are sexual diseases here, don't you?"

"What?" It would seem Johnny could only enunciate one-word questions, too baffled to elaborate.

"If you don't wear protection while engaging in sexual behavior here," Izzy explained, her cheeks slightly red as she explained this, "then you run the risk of getting a girl pregnant or contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Some are treatable and go away, some are treatable and last a life time, and some can kill you."

"So...sex *can* kill here?" Johnny asked, his mouth gaping at such an extraordinary notion.

"Absolutely," Bex said, nodding. "But we have protection."

"Protection?" Johnny asked, now turning to Izzy for further explanations. She always seemed to have the answers.

"Condoms, when used correctly, are ninety-nine percent effective," Izzy explained. "It protects you and your partner from sexual diseases as well as an unexpected pregnancy. Birth control is only for women, and while it doesn't protect against STDs, it does protect against pregnancy—if used correctly of course." She noticed

Bex's amused look at her explanation, and gave her friend a face. "I'm taking Human Sexuality, okay?"

"We should get him some condoms," Bex suggested, "and show him how to put them on using a banana, like in high school sex-ed!"

"Oh my gosh," Izzy said, her hands masking her flaming cheeks. "How about *you* teach him?"

"Would extra small work?" Bex asked.

"I can assure you that it would absolutely not work," Johnny all but growled, not quite sure what she was talking about, but felt the need to defend any sort of size jest. "And anyways, so condoms are necessary to use for the rest of your life, then?"

"For you, yeah," Bex said, remembering the conversation they had a few weeks ago.

"It depends," Izzy gently corrected, managing to look Johnny in the eyes. "If you are with a person you trust enough to know that they're not going to cheat on you, then it's okay to not use condoms. However, it would be wise for the woman to continue birth control lest she wants to all but guarantee a pregnancy."

Once Johnny processed Izzy's new information, he immediately grabbed her wrist, his dark eyes urgent. "Darling, we must get you to a physician!" he exclaimed, obvious worry in his low voice. "What if you are dying and you don't even know?! We must get you a cure—"

"What are you talking about?" Izzy asked as Bex tried to contain her laughter.

"You said if you trust someone, you won't use this *protection*, or whatever you call it," Johnny said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You trusted Zach, didn't you? And look what he did. Now, no more arguing, we are getting you to a physician right now."

Izzy's face darkened to the darkest red it could muster and she glanced down, completely oblivious to the wicked glint in Bex's dark eyes. Johnny's worry could not escape her sharp gaze. Now *this* was certainly interesting.

"We don't have to go to a physician," Izzy mumbled before forcing herself to look at the pirate. "I didn't trust Zach *that* much."

"Oh." Johnny released his hold on her wrist, and for whatever reason, this bit of information caused something content to spread through him, and he felt his body relax.

"Anyways," Bex began, keen on changing the subject. She was tempted, however, to tease Johnny about his worry over Izzy, but felt that if she did, he might not reveal what Bex could only guess he was starting to feel for her friend. "So graduation is next week."

Izzy's face lit up. "Oh, I know," she said. "I am so excited. I cannot wait to get out of school and go explore the world."

"Are you really going to take the trip, even without Zach?" Bex asked her friend, her brows pushed together.

"Why not?" Izzy asked, shrugging her shoulders. "I'll cash in his ticket and get some extra spending money and go alone."

"A trip?" Johnny asked, glancing over at Bex. "Where?"

"Europe," Bex replied before looking at her friend. "I don't think you should go alone."

"For once," Johnny said, interlocking his fingers before placing them on the surface of the table and turning his head so he could capture Izzy's gaze, "I actually agree with Bex. Going alone somewhere, especially to a whole different country, isn't the wisest decision, love."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Izzy said, shaking her head so her blonde hair followed her movements. Her head snapped up so she was looking at Bex. "Is Brandon escorting you to our Graduation Ball?"

"Yup," Bex said with a nod. "I already got my dress and—"

"Could you two hold it for a moment," Johnny said, placing both hands up and glancing between the two women, "and please explain to me what a graduation is and what a graduation ball is?"

"Graduation is the completion of a certain level of education," Izzy explained as she raked her long fingers through her blonde hair. "For us, we've completed college, which is definitely higher education."

"The Graduation Ball is a formal gathering, a ball, our school has in celebration of graduation," Bex said, a coy look lighting her dark eyes. "Only graduates are invited, plus their escorts." She paused, glancing between the two in an obvious manner. "You know, Izzy doesn't have an escort, Johnny, and I think it would be such a great idea if—"

"Food's here," Izzy interjected quickly before flashing a charming smile between the two as the waiter passed out the food.

15

How long had it been since he had gotten laid?

Johnny ran his long fingers through his dark, shaggy hair as he stared out at the bar floor, watching as people played what he recently found out was pool, drank and ate, and some even danced. The thought had been plaguing his mind for a while now, probably since his appetite required constant attention. But now it would appear as though he'd quit sex cold turkey. Well, he had yet to quit drinking wine (though he would admit that he cut down quite a bit than normal) and smoking his rolled tobacco. In fact, during his breaks, he and Candy would head out back. She would smoke cigarettes and he would smoke his rolled tobacco. He had tried the sticks once, but found them unappealing, preferring his own smokes to hers.

Now, however, his eyes were on Izzy, as they always seemed to be. She was laughing again at something she found amusing, and without even realizing it, Johnny had this overwhelming desire to be the one to make her laugh like that. In fact, Johnny had found himself wishing that he could do a lot of things with her. Besides the obvious, he wanted to take her on the ocean and explore it with her, he wanted to watch her sleep, he wanted to make her laugh, he wanted to make her moan, he wanted to touch her and memorize every inch of her. She was someone he couldn't quite wrap his mind around, but it would appear as though he had no qualms about wrapping himself around her finger.

Well, this just wouldn't do.

Johnny Clover could never—*would* never—be a one-woman man. He already had a couple of discussions about it with Bex, and he had had one with Brian as well. Despite their attempts at making love seem like the best feeling in the world, Johnny still felt as though he had the upper hand in this whole love game. No commitments. That was what was most important to him. Especially now! Who knew when Willow would pluck him out of this world and deposit him back into his original one? That woman was slightly deranged at best, and even if he *did—could—feel*

something for Izzy, it definitely wasn't going to last. Love was a feeling, an emotion, not a superpower. Not that he was in love, of course. It was just a hypothetical thought.

Candy had never had a chat with him about love, but then again, he had never fully discussed the matter with Izzy either. Not really, anyways. They were two women on opposite ends of the spectrum. He wanted to have sexual fun with one, and he wanted to make love to another. Furrowing his brow at such a notion, his index finger brushed across his bottom lip as he watched Izzy gracefully carry a tray of drinks to a table filled with a group of college kids. He didn't ever remember making love to anyone. Maybe when he was young and naïve, and maybe when he actually did believe in the concept of love, but he had never engaged in the act recently. And he never had the desire to. Until now.

Okay, okay; not good.

The pirate tried to pull his eyes away from Izzy, but found that he could not. Today, she was in tight blue jeans that hugged the curves of her legs, her hips, and her rear, and over them were black knee-high boots with a red scarf tied around the left one. Her shirt had no sleeves, but gripped the woman's frame, showing off a commendable pair of breasts and a flat stomach. Her golden hair was pulled up into a high ponytail, revealing her beautiful face. She never really wore her hair up except when she was at work, but he found that he liked looking at it very much. It was something unlike anything he had ever seen before. As such, he wanted nothing more than to trace it with his fingertips, to watch it for her reactions as he pleased her, and to memorize every curve, every freckle, every inch of it.

Johnny bit his lip, but a frustrated groan escaped from him nonetheless. He needed sex; meaningless, carefree, loveless sex. He needed to reacquaint himself with the activity. Going without sex for a while had horrible consequences, such as thinking odd, romantic thoughts about someone who he didn't feel romantic about. Yes, maybe if he had sex with somebody else, he might be able to forget her, what he couldn't have.

That's not true, a stubborn voice muttered in his head. You could have her if you wanted. You just don't want her.

Oh, but he did. He was sexually attracted to Izzy, and there were moments when he would sit at her dining table and watch her do homework, silently losing himself in numerous fantasies that all had

one thing in common: she was in them. This troubled him to no end because he had never fantasized about a woman before. Any woman he wanted to have sex with he just had sex with. There was really no need to fantasize about it. Izzy was a whole other matter. He couldn't just walk up to her and suggest she slip on the lingerie he had first seen her in, though he found he wanted nothing more. She was his friend, one of the first ones he had, and he was afraid that any physical activity concerning the two of them might ruin said friendship. He could admit that she was his friend, and he could admit that he enjoyed the benefits of having her as such. He didn't want to lose her over something meaningless.

Yes, but making love is not meaningless, another voice whispered. If you love her, of course.

"I do not love her," he all but growled, narrowing his eyes in said woman's direction, as though it was her fault he was so troubled.

"Ah," a patron at the bar said after hearing him. "Woman problems?" Johnny was about to reply in the negative when the man's next statements made him pause. "You know what I always do when I've got somebody on my mind I don't want there? I sleep with another woman, you know, to forget. It doesn't work long-term or anything, but at least it takes my mind off her, if only for a second."

Johnny didn't reply to the man's statement, and the man was too drunk to care. However, the words the man had told the pirate were quite brilliant, if a little hard to comprehend. He had been craving sexual release for quite some time now, and it would seem that the more he went without it, the more his craving for Izzy herself seemed to multiply. It baffled him how simple the answer was, but then again, Johnny was used to complex solutions. Of course! Sleep with somebody else. Maybe if he found someone to aid him physically, he would forget all about the focus of his desires and consider her as just a friend from now on. Yes. He would do it. Tonight.

Once the bar closed that night, and Brian headed in the back, Johnny propositioned Candy. She, of course, agreed, as he had expected she would, and the two cleaned up the bar as quickly as they could in order to get down to business. Johnny forced his eyes to focus on his task at hand, but every once in a while, he would watch the swaying blonde beauty as she cleaned the surfaces of the

tables. Every time he did, however, an unexplainable feeling of his chest constricting quite painfully overtook him until he looked away.

Candy led him into the closet when things were finished, assuming they had a good fifteen minutes before anyone would notice they were gone. The whole conversation about sexual diseases frightened Johnny into telling Candy he had no form of protection, and though Candy didn't seem to mind, Johnny insisted they couldn't actually engage in sexual behavior until he got one. Instead, the two opted for a very heated make-out session.

Upon first kissing her, the pirate scrunched his nose a bit. She tasted like she recently smoked one of her cigarettes and idly wondered if that was what he tasted like after smoking his tobacco. It definitely did not taste good. Pushing aside his disgust, he tried to clear his mind and focus. Focus! Why was it so hard for him to focus? He *really* needed to get laid. Maybe Bex could get him some condoms....

After a while, Johnny felt himself relax and even respond to Candy's wandering hands. Ah, he had been missing this. His hand outlined her body and came to rest on her hips before making their way back up again. And boy, did she know what to do with that tongue...

At that moment, the door swung open, causing both people to spring apart. When Johnny's eyes rested on Izzy, his chest constricted once again, but this time, to a more painful degree. She all but dropped the cleaning supplies she had finished with, and she swallowed. Johnny could easily tell that she was hurt; it was so evident in her eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but Izzy didn't see him, and closed the door. Candy smirked at this, and went to Johnny in order to continue what had been interrupted, but he was already reaching for the door.

Out of all the things he wanted to do to Izzy, hurt her was not one of them.

It was then that he realized what he was feeling. Guilt. He was feeling guilt. And he didn't know why.

Once he opened the door and stepped outside, his eyes sought out Izzy, but it would appear that she was already gone.

Izzy had to get out of there. She had finished with what she was required to do anyways; it wasn't like she would be ditching anybody.... She just had to leave. Her chest constricted together painfully, and she suddenly couldn't breathe as well. The young woman needed air, oxygen, and she slipped out the back and into the cold, bitter night. She let a painful sigh slip out of her nose and looked around for somewhere to sit.

Why was she feeling this way? So what if Johnny and Candy were making out in the cleaning supply closet? That was their business, not hers. Johnny was a grown man. He could do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, with whoever he wanted. She wasn't his mother, his sister, or even his girlfriend. And she didn't want to be, right?

Let's face it: why would she knowingly fall in love with somebody who didn't believe in love? That was practically suicide, wasn't it? She had already gotten hurt with Zach nearly a month ago. Could somebody really move on from a three-year relationship so quickly? Was Johnny a rebound? Izzy couldn't lie to herself. She knew she felt something for the man. She wasn't exactly sure if she loved him or merely liked him, and she wasn't exactly sure if it was because he was a pirate, if it was because he resembled Johnny Depp, or something completely different.

But she felt *something* for him.

Just because you feel something for him doesn't mean he feels something for you, a voice in her head told her. It was harsh, but it was true. If Johnny Clover's personality resembled Jack Sparrow's only slightly, it was highly doubtful the pirate was intent on settling down. And she couldn't get involved with someone who wouldn't commit to her. There were times when she wished that she was the type of girl where she could enjoy the benefits of being in a relationship without actually being in a relationship, but she wasn't and that made things harder for her.

Izzy looked around into the darkness as she ran her fingers through her hair. Besides the moon, lampposts with dull lighting lit

up the pathway to her home, and she started walking from the restaurant in hopes to avoid any sort of confrontation. A sneer littered her face, shaking her head at such a thought. Yeah, like he would be running after her. Why would he be doing that anyways? It wasn't as though he returned her feelings. If anything, Johnny was probably right where Izzy had found him—making out with Candy in the closet.

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Izzy decided to head home. As she walked, she focused on the waves rolling into the shore and crashing on the sand. She tilted her head to the side and glanced over at it, a small smile touching her face as she did so. God, she loved the sea. She loved the sound, the feel, the sight, even the smell. Maybe not the taste. But she loved the beautiful body of water, and wished at times that she had the opportunity to explore it. That was why she truly believed she was a pirate in a past life—*had* to be.

“I’ll read your fortune?”

Izzy stopped in her tracks at the voice and glanced over to her left. Standing there was a woman, with long, flowing red hair and smooth alabaster skin. Her body was lithe, her stature was tall, and she was wearing no shoes on her feet. Her clothes looked to be handmade, but they were actually pretty nice, coming in unique shades of different colors. Her tone had an accent that Izzy couldn't quite place, but it was melodious and almost hypnotizing. She had no Tarot cards on her, no crystal ball. The woman was standing there by herself, underneath one of the lights provided by the lamppost. She looked friendly enough, but then again, it was three in the morning. What if the woman tried to lure Izzy towards her so she could rob her?

In Balboa? a disbelieving voice asked.

“It could happen,” Izzy muttered under her breath. She then turned back to the woman with the knowing blue eyes, who was regarding the young woman patiently. “Um...no thanks. I’ve actually gotta get home.”

“Please Isabelle,” the psychic said in her usual soft tone, taking a step towards Izzy. “I know what troubles you. It will only take a moment.”

Izzy felt every hair on her skin stand up at the mention of her name. How did this woman know her name? Instead of answering, she watched the woman. The psychic smiled, as though she knew

what was going on in Izzy's mind, and took another step forward. Her sharp lips curled up and deepened, and she reached out her arm and flexed her fingers. Izzy glanced down at the offered hand and she hesitated. What if this woman was a quack? What if someone had told her Izzy's name? What if this was some big joke?

"I assure you, Isabelle," the woman said, meeting the young woman's skeptical gaze, "that this is no joke." She paused a moment before nodding once. "Now, please."

She just read her mind. How could—Wait, no, she didn't want to appear to be a fool in her mind. Instead, she swallowed and finally placed her hand in the psychic's.

"Isabelle, much is troubling you," the psychic began, "but nothing more than a man, a man not of this world. I feel as though you've recently experienced a parting of ways with somebody you trusted, somebody you cared about." She tilted her head, letting the ringlets of red drape around her frame. "I wish to express to you that all is not lost. Everything happens for a reason, which I am sure you know."

Izzy said nothing, but she was quite fascinated by how accurate this woman was. So much so that Izzy actually felt...she wasn't sure if afraid was the correct word. Maybe awed or even slightly overwhelmed. "I just don't get it!" she exclaimed, all of her pent-up frustration at Johnny and Candy coming out. She didn't mean to take anything out on this psychic, but she didn't know what else to do. The one thing that consistently stayed on her mind for the past three and a half weeks was, why had Johnny come to her? Why not anybody else?

The psychic's lips curled up, easily reading Izzy's frustration and understanding why she felt that way. "You are not yet supposed to," she told the young woman, her accent making her predictions that much more ominous. "But in due time, you will find out." She paused here and thought a long moment as her blue eyes took in Izzy's palm, intricately going over every line, every mount her hand had to offer. "I assume you are frustrated with the pirate currently in your life, hmm?" she asked, though it was obvious the psychic already knew. "But what you think you are frustrated with does not match up to what you are actually frustrated with."

"I...I don't understand," Izzy mumbled. She didn't like the fact that this woman seemed to know more about her feelings than she did.

“You think you are frustrated,” the psychic began, “because you are not sure why, out of all the people in this world, Johnny Clover was sent to you. Three and a half weeks later and you still do not understand. But Isabelle, you are not yet supposed to understand that. Everything will reveal itself to you when it is appropriate to do so. The real reason you are frustrated, my dear, is because you feel something for Johnny Clover you do not understand. You know that it is highly improbable for the pirate to feel something for you in return, and so your frustration simply escalates. But I am here to tell you that Johnny Clover needs you more than he realizes. There is a reason why he was sent to you and no one else, and it has to do with the fact that you can provide him with something nobody else can.”

“And what’s that, exactly?” Izzy asked, furrowing her brow as flashes of Johnny and Candy began to decorate her mind. “He seems to be provided for, from what I could tell.”

Another knowing smile littered the psychic’s striking face. “Well, at this moment, you are providing him with a good dose of guilt,” she told the woman.

Izzy looked at the woman with disbelief clearly etched out onto her features. “Right,” she said, slipping her hand out of the woman’s. “Well, I should get going. It’s cold, it’s late, and I’m really tired.”

“If I may offer you one point of advice, Isabelle,” the psychic called, stopping the retreating woman once again. Izzy glanced over her shoulder and looked at the psychic expectantly. “Do not go home tonight. If you have a friend, stay with her.” The woman’s eyes darkened almost to a midnight color. “Make him sweat it out.”

Izzy glanced in front of her, staring into the black, starless sky. She wasn’t sure if Johnny would be “sweating it out,” as the psychic had said. When she turned around to thank the psychic, the woman was gone. Izzy’s hair stood up once again, and she gulped before deciding to follow the psychic’s advice.

To Bex’s it was.

Candy's fingers curled around Johnny's wrist, preventing him from opening the door and going after Izzy. Johnny stopped short, trying to regain composure with a deep sigh, before turning around and eyeing the young woman with an unreadable stare. Though the room was dark for the most part, Candy could easily see the frustration and even the anger packed behind those eyes of his, and felt herself let go of him. He didn't have to open his mouth to say anything; his eyes did that for him. She had never seen him look this upset before, and she didn't want to be the person he took his anger out on. Though she longed to call him back because she had wanted some alone time with the mysterious man from England, she pressed her lips together so they molded into a thin line. Johnny clenched his jaw, causing it to pop slightly, before nodding his thanks once and heading out the door.

Now, where could Izzy be? His eyes glanced at the floor of the bar, but found that besides Zach putting the chairs on the tables as he usually did, no one else was out there. The pirate began searching through the bathroom, going into both sets of bathrooms, and even asking Brian if he knew where she might be.

"If Izzy finishes early, I let her go," Brian had explained to him.

So it was likely that she wasn't even there anymore.

Johnny pushed out the back door, and once his eyes got used to the darkness, he tried to find her moving silhouette retreating back to her nearby apartment. His brows were pushed up and his lips were pushed out into a frown. He turned around so he was facing the opposite direction, but again, he found no luck in trying to find her. He reached in his trench coat pocket and slipped out one of his last rolls of tobacco. The man had been trying to ration them when he realized he was running low, especially since cigarettes here could be quite expensive and didn't taste as good. He stuck the dark brown stick into his mouth and lit a match, touching the flame to the end of the roll. Immediately, he inhaled the toxins, feeling his tense body start to relax.

"Now what?" he asked to himself as smoke filtered out of his

mouth, his eyes ascending up to the sky. His frown only deepened when he realized that tonight did not provide him with diamond-like stars. Instead, purple haze masked the majority of celestial bodies the night provided the naked eye. Even the moon was new, and thus was not out. Johnny, for the first time since falling into this new world, truly felt alone.

You'll find her, of course, a voice told him as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. *What if she's hurt somewhere, if she needs your help in some way? You're just standing there smoking, doing nothing!*

She's fine by herself, another voice pointed out skeptically. *She's been here before without you, and if you disappear, she'll be fine without you.*

"I don't want to disappear," Johnny mumbled to himself as he placed the tobacco between his lips once again.

And why not? the second voice asked, and Johnny was sure if there was a body that went along with his voice, his hands would be on his hips. *Don't you miss the ease the past offers you? Being naïve and unaccountable for anything? Women at every port ready to throw themselves at you? The best, finest wine just waiting for your lips to touch? More of your favorite rolled tobacco? Your boat waiting for your use once again, eager to help you make your hasty escape whenever need be? How could you not want to go back to that? So you have to take on a captain role in an impending war. Would you rather be here?*

"Yes," Johnny told himself, even nodding once. His index finger touched his bottom lip as though he was deep in thought. "Yes, I think I would."

And why is that? the second voice asked, a bit annoyed. *What does this life have to offer you that your original one doesn't? So what if they have advanced technology, scantily dressed women willing to throw themselves at you without payment, and other stuff? What could you possibly want here that doesn't satisfy you there?*

"Izzy," he murmured without actually thinking. "This life has Izzy and my other one did not."

Izzy? the voice exclaimed. *A woman?! And why are you feeling guilty for being caught in the closet anyways? You are a man with desires and needs (which, by the way, have not been fulfilled as of yet) and Izzy knows this. She told you not to bring any women back to the apartment, and you followed her rule. What did she expect?!*

"She walked in," Johnny told himself. "She wasn't supposed to

have walked in.”

Well, she did, and that's that, the voice said, and if it had hands, it would be wiping them together dismissively. *You had better not apologize either, Johnny Clover. You did absolutely nothing wrong, and you know that. It was her fault for not knocking and just letting herself in.*

Right, the first voice said dryly. *Because she's supposed to knock when it concerns the supply closet.*

“Ooh,” Johnny said, grabbing his head with both hands and shaking it. “Both of you, shut it. I don’t want to listen to either of you anymore.” He forced himself to start walking again, following the dim light provided by the lampposts. He wasn’t exactly sure where Izzy was at this moment, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t worried about her. However, he decided to just head back home, and with this thought, he shoved his hands in his pockets, feeling his shoulders slump forward. Even if the second voice in his head was right and he didn’t necessarily do anything wrong, Johnny couldn’t prevent the guilt from seeping through his body.

But the voice was right. Technically, he hadn’t done anything wrong. And yet, when he had looked into Izzy’s eyes, the only thing he could find in them was hurt. When he saw that, he couldn’t help but feel hurt in return. It wasn’t as though he had intended to hurt her, of course, but it didn’t seem to matter. It was so evident that he had. He had never seen her so vulnerable in that short instant, except the first night he had arrived, when she had found out about Zach.

Wait, was he comparing himself to Zach? Even he admitted that he dabbled in a non-monogamous lifestyle, and he was quite happy with that decision. However, he had never committed to one woman in the first place and then cheated on her, as they called it here. He was always upfront about how he viewed life, and that there was no changing him, especially when he didn’t believe in love.

But Izzy *did* believe in love. And the pirate found that he cared about what she cared about, however nonsensical it seemed to him.

Maybe he should apologize to her. He just wasn’t sure what to apologize for. Even if, and this was quite a big hypothetical, he actually liked her enough to engage in some kind of relationship with her didn’t mean that he actually had. He hadn’t asked her, and she hadn’t brought it up. Logically, she had no reason to be upset

with him. He was a free man, and could do whatever he wished with whomever he wished.

When was love ever logical? the first voice asked, and Johnny could see that it was currently raising an eyebrow—if it had one, anyways. *It sounds like you're falling into it, mate.*

“Am not,” Johnny said with a frown as he headed up the stairs and to Izzy’s front porch. He paused for a moment, his eyes gazing at the door where Izzy had found him his first morning in this place. She had invited him to breakfast, bought him food, and continued to help him after he had accidentally called her fat. And she had allowed him to live with her. Bought him clothes. Got him a job. She really had done a lot for him, and she didn’t even really know him.

How? How could she trust him like that?

He grabbed the keys Izzy had made him and slid the contraption into the door before opening it. Immediately, Johnny noticed the house was dark save for the kitchen light the young woman kept on throughout the day to ward off burglars. Did that mean she was still gone, or had she forgotten to turn it off when she had gotten home? Johnny shut and locked the door behind him. When his gaze caught Izzy’s room, he noticed the door was closed. Maybe he could sort this whole mess out in the morning. And maybe he would be able to sort his feelings out for her by that time as well.

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and Izzy had yet to emerge from her room. Johnny had awoken early, maybe sixish, because he had wanted to make sure to catch the sunrise as the rays touched down on the water so it sparkled beautifully against the sky. At least, that was what he had told himself. Once the spectacle was over, he took a seat in the dining room where he happened to be staring at her bedroom door. An hour later, he made himself some cereal (Izzy had taught him the joys of simplistic eatery) and poured himself some juice. Izzy had enquired about his preference for coffee, but after he had tried the vile liquid, he decided against it. Izzy smiled at this; she didn't like the drink anyways.

What was he to do except listening to the ticking of the clock? It wasn't until nine thirteen that Johnny pushed himself off the wooden chair and headed towards her room. He felt his hand head towards the doorknob, but he stopped himself and sighed through his nose, hoping to control his nerves. Speaking of which, why were the buggers bothering him at this time? He had known her for nearly a month now, and since they were cohabiting together and working side by side, their knowledge of each other had grown. He felt something for her; he wasn't exactly sure what. Maybe this was what it felt like to confront a friend? Yes, a friend. She was just a friend.

A friend who didn't bloody wake up early!

Instead of blindly opening the door and intruding on her privacy, Johnny rapped his knuckles on the surface of the door. He didn't want to pound, but at the same time, he really did want to see her, to reassure himself that she was all right, despite the events of the previous night. He stood there, looking at the door expectantly before running his long fingers through his shaggy hair. Currently, he was decked out in his usual nightwear: a white wife beater and plaid pajama bottoms. These ones were blue and black; he preferred the red and black ones.

She still had yet to answer.

Frowning at this, Johnny pushed his brows together and brought

his fingers to his chin. Maybe he hadn't knocked loud enough. Maybe she was sleeping too deeply. Maybe... What if she was ignoring him? His frown deepened, causing a vertical indentation to plaster the space between his brows.

She wouldn't ignore him, would she? A flash of Izzy's face popped into his mind, complete with the look of sadness, betrayal etched out into her vivid eyes. Hell hath no woman, he always said, and he had found out on numerous occasions how true that philosophy really was. So, if he used that sort of reasoning, then yes, she might be ignoring him. On purpose, no less! The gall of that woman! It wasn't as though he had done anything to hurt her intentionally! He had a mind to march right into her bedroom, damn the consequences and damn the proper etiquette.

And so he did.

Except that when he entered her bedroom, he found it to be remarkably...empty. He stepped further into her room, his ever-sharp chocolate eyes scanning the room intricately, hoping to find some sort of oddity that would tell him she had been here last night. But she *hadn't* been there last night. He most certainly would have heard the front door open, her soft footsteps as they padded across the living room, the opening and closing of her door. Normally he was a deep sleeper, but when it came to her, well, he supposed it was slightly different because she was his friend.... Her bedroom was in good shape, considering she had to juggle higher education, a job, and a pirate. He took a seat on the edge of the bed, simply inhaling the vanilla and strawberry scent as it filled his pointed nose.

Suddenly, a familiar sound at the front door caused any and all thoughts to vanish from his mind. It was a key! Izzy had told him that was a sound of a key entering the door, and only he, Bex, and Izzy had keys to get into the apartment. Considering the fact that he was here, he had a fifty percent chance that it was Izzy, and another fifty percent chance that it was Bex. He pushed his lips down and he furrowed his brow; he hoped it wasn't Bex.

When he walked out into the living room, Johnny found that it was exactly the person he had wanted to see. Izzy looked absolutely fresh, as though she had a very nice sleep. While Johnny wasn't quick to admit it, even to himself, his sleep wasn't as grand. In fact, he thought the word sleep was an overestimation of what had engulfed him the night before. Perhaps doze would work better. So,

while he was quite relieved that Izzy was all right, to see her so happy when he was so...flustered, caused him to get...well, even *more* flustered. And this caused him to get upset.

So when the pirate spoke, he might have been a tad presumptuous. "Where, exactly, were you last night?" he asked her, his tone immediately taking on suspicion as his eyes narrowed into hers. What if she had been with a man last night? Well, he would take care of whoever might have violated her, and then... He didn't even want to entertain the possibility that she was with somebody else besides him. Wait, wait, wait—

"Excuse me?" Izzy asked him, scrunching her brows together. "Who are you, my mother?"

"I feel as though since we have been cohabiting together for nearly a month, you owe me some sort of explanation as to the whereabouts of where you've been," Johnny continued, not exactly sure if what he had said made sense. As long as he made his point, however, he was satisfied.

"Yeah, well the stunt you pulled last night told me that I don't have to tell you anything," Izzy muttered, raking her fingers through her golden hair.

"So this is about my little escapade with Candy in the closet, is it?" Johnny asked, his brow raising as he moved towards her. "Well, just so you know, my preferences in women are none of your concern and as a result, I do not have to say anything."

"Exactly!" Izzy exclaimed, throwing her arms out and giving him an obvious look. "So where I was last night is none of your business."

Johnny opened his mouth to respond to her, but paused for a moment as his eyes glanced at the ceiling. Much to his dismay, the retort he had been looking for was *not* on the ceiling, and nowhere he could see. Izzy's triumphant smirk only caused him to scowl, and he shook his head, causing his dark hair to follow his movements.

"Was it with a man?" he suddenly asked, his desire to know outweighing his pride at that point. "You know, I never actually took you for a whore, Isabelle."

"Don't you ever call me a whore, Johnny Clover," Izzy all but shouted, stalking over to him so she was mere inches from his face. Her eyes burned with hot, unshed tears, offended that he could even insinuate such a thing about her. "Don't you ever say that to me, when you were gallivanting in a closet with the bar slut."

"Is this about jealousy?" Johnny asked, his voice returning to its normal inflection as he crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Izzy with an inquiring gaze. "Are you jealous of my decidedly intimate interaction with Candy?"

"I really don't need to know about any interaction with anyone," Izzy said, wincing. "And of course you had to turn this into something about you, but let me just tell you one thing." She jutted her index finger in his face, her fingertip nearly brushing the tip of his nose. "I will never *ever* be jealous of any woman you're *decidedly intimate* with, because to be jealous would mean that I was even remotely interested in you, which I'm not."

Johnny really did try to grasp what Izzy was saying, but he was distracted by the fiery gold her usual brown eyes transformed into when she was upset. He wondered what shade they would take on in the heat of passion. Maybe a chocolate color? Maybe a darker color? He wasn't quite sure, but he knew he wanted to be the one to find out. He tilted his head to the side, inching his lips ever so slightly forward. Her hot breath now tickled his skin, and her lips were just begging to be kissed. Would she feel affronted if he kissed her in mid-lecture?

"How do you even know, darling?" Johnny asked, slipping on his notorious charming smile as his eyes danced in hers mischievously. "Maybe we should test your theory out, to be extra sure you're not interested in me." He reached out to grasp her hips, but she weaseled her way out of his grasp. Johnny caught fear deeply embedded in her eyes, and he paused. Was she afraid of him, that he would harm her in any way?

"Trust me," Izzy said, pushing her brow up and forcing the fear out of her body. How stupid she was to be afraid of him touching her.

You're afraid because you know that you would like it, a voice inside her head taunted.

"You're not even my type," she forced herself to say before heading into her room and slamming the door shut behind her.

Well. Johnny stared at the shut door for a long moment. At least he knew she was home now.

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The next few days came and went in a sort of blur. If Izzy was being honest, she was still upset at Johnny and that nerve of his! Even as she was throwing on her royal blue graduation gown, the fight they had had kept replaying over and over in her mind. The nerve of that man to be upset at her for spending the night out when he had been shoving his tongue down Candy's throat. Now, any desire she ever had for kissing him had pretty much gone out the window. Not that she ever wanted to kiss him, but if she had it would be gone. Who did he think he was, anyway? He wasn't her brother or her father, or even an uncle or someone along those lines. He was just a pirate from the eighteenth century who happened to have fallen into her apartment at the most inopportune time, and hadn't left since. Just the thought that he believed he had every right to order her around caused the desire to throw her straightener across the bathroom. But she couldn't because she knew just how expensive the item was.

When Izzy finished, she grabbed her graduation cap and placed it underneath her arm before heading out the door. She wasn't exactly sure if Johnny was up, in the apartment, or somewhere else entirely, and she forced herself not to care. As she bounded down the steps, she tried to focus on graduation.

She would be graduating college today. How incredibly exciting was that? Her mother and father would be there, maybe her brother, but Lord knew he had better things to do than to attend his younger sister's graduation, and Bex would be there as well. Apparently after a heated discussion with her counselor, Bex still had one more semester to go before she graduated, and Izzy was glad she could count on her friend to be there for her.

Before exiting her car, Izzy quickly looked at herself in the small vanity mirror. Eyeliner, mascara, and gloss occupied her face, bringing out her eyes and making her full lips stand out. She pinned on her cap, hoping that the soft sea breeze wouldn't cause it to fly off as she accepted her diploma. In fact, she hoped she wouldn't trip over her gown or even herself as she walked up to shake the dean's

hand.

But Izzy did neither. When they called her name, the stadium applauded politely, and she managed to shake the dean's hand and accept her diploma as gracefully as she could. It was official; she was a college graduate. After this summer, she would be heading out into the job force, getting a job, starting a career...

I thought you wanted to travel, a voice murmured inside her head as she waited for the ceremony to finish.

"I can't afford to go gallivanting across the world," she muttered under breath.

Finally, the commencement ceremony ended and all the graduates threw their caps in the air. Luckily, Izzy managed to find her cap, and she walked over to the bleachers, waiting for her family. It took a moment as families of different graduates descended onto the field in hopes to take pictures with certain professors or nice scenery, but after ten minutes, the young woman managed to make out her family through the crowd.

Bex saw her first and ran over to her, nearly toppling Izzy over as Bex pulled her friend into a tight hug. "Oh, congratulations, Izzy!" she murmured genuinely, before taking a step back and meeting her dark eyes with Izzy's. "How does it feel?"

Before she could respond, Izzy saw her mother and father as well as another familiar figure. Was that—?

"What is Johnny doing here?" Izzy asked Bex under her breath.

"Mr. and Mrs. Daniels!" Bex exclaimed, clearly avoiding her best friend's question. "So glad you could make it."

"Yes, well," Helena Daniels said, her dark blue eyes flitting over the stadium in obvious distaste. Her hand cupped the side of her back while her other was holding on to her husband's arm. Her dyed, bleach-blond hair was pulled up into a clip, and her pale face was lathered in makeup without going over the top. She had a petite frame that seemed to drown in her new Chanel suit but seemed rather comfortable in her matching heels. "Our daughter is graduating college and all."

"We are so proud of you," Damon Daniels said, reaching out and squeezing his daughter's shoulder warmly. His hazel eyes reflected his statement as he regarded his only daughter, and he pulled her into a tight hug.

"Oh, Damon!" Helena exclaimed, her eyes immediately looking over her husband's crisp, Armani suit. "Your suit! We still have to

see Luke after this, you know, and it wouldn't be fair for you to show up looking less than spectacular."

"Where is Luke?" Izzy asked, trying to keep the contempt out of her voice. Despite her usual happy-go-lucky nature, her mother managed to bring out the cynic in the young woman.

"He's sorry he couldn't come," Damon said, trying to reassure his daughter.

"Who is this man?" Helena said, turning her face to finally regard Johnny, who happened to be studying the scene that was unfolding before him quietly. "Oh Isabelle, did you hire this man to accompany you here because he looks like Johnny Depp? That's pretty low, even for your addiction to that actor."

"Mom," Izzy said, narrowing her eyes at her mother. Helena regarded her daughter almost lazily. She met eyes with Johnny for a moment, before swallowing. "This is my friend, Johnny Clover."

"His name is even Johnny," Helena said in a dry voice, rolling her blue eyes up to the sky. "Imagine that." Her hand moved dismissively around as though she had her usual dry martini in her French-manicured hand. "Whatever happened to Zach? I liked him very much, you know."

"I told you this, Mom," Izzy said through gritted teeth, trying to contain her patience along with her temper. "Zach and I broke up."

"Well, can't you just apologize for whatever it is you did wrong and get back together with him?" Helena asked breezily, almost as though it was the most obvious decision in the world for her daughter to do.

Damon immediately recognized the fire that sparked in his daughter's eyes, and intervened before Izzy had the chance. "Congratulations again, darling," he told his daughter. "Now, your mother and I really should get going. We have to meet Luke in about forty-five minutes."

"You mean she's not coming with us?" Helena asked, appalled at the notion her daughter wouldn't accompany her parents to meet with the golden child.

"I can't," Izzy said. "I told you, I have my graduation ball tonight."

"Oh, of course," Helena said as her husband proceeded to lead her away. "As long as your priorities are in check."

Bex stepped in front of her friend, her hands gripping the sides of her shoulders to keep Izzy from going after her mother. Bex

wasn't sure if Izzy would do anything in public, especially at her graduation, but she also knew that no one could get to Izzy as her mother could, and because of that, she wanted to take all the necessary precautions.

Izzy felt her body slowly start to relax, especially when her parents disappeared into the large crowd of graduates and their families. Her eyes finally found Johnny's, and she felt her face blush under his enquiring gaze. "I'm sorry," she murmured softly. "I'm sorry for my parents' behavior, especially my mother's."

"Are you all right, love?" Johnny asked, leaning towards her, much closer than what was necessary.

Izzy found it hard to think of a response when Johnny looked so breathtakingly handsome. He wasn't wearing anything over the top, just a simple white, long-sleeved collared shirt tucked into navy blue slacks. A couple of buttons were left undone, revealing the beginnings of a nicely toned torso. She was supposed to be mad at him, wasn't she? How could she be, when he looked like that? And his dark eyes seemed genuinely concerned about her well-being.

"I'm fine," she told him before running her fingers through her hair. She found it much easier to do now that it was straight. "I'm just...I'm sorry if my parents offended you in any way."

"They're your parents," Bex said flatly. "They offend everyone."

"What happened to your hair?" Johnny asked, reaching out and taking a few strands of hair between his fingertips, staring at it and feeling the silkiness. "What happened to the waves?"

"Oh," Izzy said, feeling another flush mask her cheeks. "I straightened it."

"Is it going to be this way forever?" Johnny asked, clearly worried at the thought.

"No, of course not," Izzy replied, shaking her head. She found this somewhat difficult to do since Johnny still had some of her hair in his hand. "Once I shower or come in contact with water, it'll go back to the way it normally is."

"Are you keeping it this way tonight?" he asked her, his brow perking.

"I don't know," she said. "Why?"

"I just like it better the way you normally wear it," Johnny told her honestly. Izzy was about to retort something along the lines of how it didn't matter seeing as how he wasn't taking her to the ball, but Johnny seemed to sense this, and cut in. "Now, tell me, why did

everyone throw their caps up at the end of the ceremony? In fact, why have a ceremony in the first place?”

20

When Johnny first laid eyes on Izzy as she headed down her apartment stairs, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was wearing a royal blue strapless dress with a ruched cross bodice that added texture to a classic shape. The sweetheart cut revealed a bit of her cleavage in a classy way and the empire waistline highlighted her slim frame while the skirt itself billowed around her loosely. Her blonde hair was completely pulled back into a lovely bun, some strands threaded with small pearls. Her makeup was light and natural, but the necessities were highlighted; her brown eyes stood out, her already full lips looked even fuller, and her sharp cheekbones looked higher than they already were. Johnny was glad to see her freckles were still shown; she looked absolutely beautiful. On her feet there were simple black high heels.

She looked absolutely...

Johnny had been thinking about his feelings for the past twelve hours. Actually, he had been thinking of her from the moment he first laid eyes upon her, and when he realized she had stirred unfamiliar feelings inside of him, he thought on them whenever he wasn't distracted with something else. But as he looked at her descending the stairs, he realized that he wanted her all to himself. Though he may never be able to offer her love, he could offer everything that went along with the emotion. Hell, he may even be able to be monogamous to her. He had already started, what with not having any sort of sexual relations since coming to this new world, although he was tempted.

But that wasn't because of Izzy, now was it? He just didn't desire to, which was quite odd, now that he thought of it.

"What are you doing here?" Izzy asked once she finally reached the bottom. She arched her brow suspiciously and began to look at the man in front of her.

Johnny looked painstakingly handsome in the suit he was wearing. It was different from the one they had bought at South Coast Plaza, but it fit his frame in such a way that Izzy could swear it was made with him in mind. It was a black suit, with white

pinstripes running down both the blazer and the slacks. A white, long-sleeved collared shirt sat underneath his blazer, and a dark navy blue tie with dull green stripes hung from around his neck. A maroon satin handkerchief was placed expertly in his breast pocket, the top of it sticking out in a triangular shape. If there was ever to be a photo of what perfection looked like, Johnny would surely be it. His dark, shaggy hair was pushed back from his face so not one stray strand fell into it. She also noticed that he shaved, now completely free of any and all facial hair, revealing a well-defined jaw line. This only brought out more of his angular face, highlighting his cheekbones, his perfect, low brow, his dark, dangerous eyes. Her lips drifted to his lips, and she wanted to badly to push on her toes and claim his lips with hers.

Sensing this, she took a step back, hoping the distance would stop her from engaging in such an act of foolishness.

“Izzy!” a female voice exclaimed, running up to her friend. Izzy’s eyes narrowed when she saw Bex; of course her friend would be behind this. Izzy was perfectly fine going to the graduation ball by herself! She didn’t need a man to escort her!

Although...Johnny did look exceedingly handsome....

“I enlisted Johnny to accompany you to the ball,” Bex told her friend, as though it was the best idea she had ever had. “I figured after everything today, hell, the *whole* month, really, you deserve a night for fun. And I thought that you and Johnny get along well enough, so why not?”

“I would be honored,” Johnny began as he reached out and took her hand in his, before leaning forward slightly as he brought her fingers to his lips, “to accompany you to your ball.” His lips brushed her knuckles, causing every hair on her body to stand while warmth spread throughout her body. There were times Izzy forgot that Johnny was a pirate back in the eighteenth century, but little acts of chivalry such as this one reminded her.

“All right,” Izzy finally said, turning her head in hopes he wouldn’t see her blush. She slipped her fingers from his and headed to the passenger seat of Bex’s car, trying to calm her steady heart.

Even after the car ride pulled up to UCI’s huge library, Izzy still had a fluttery feeling in her chest. Before she could turn and slip outside, Johnny was at the door, and proceeded to open it for her. He offered her his hand, and for a moment, all Izzy could do was look at him. His eyes, whether he meant them to or not, gave her a

smoldering look, causing a sensual shiver to run down her back. She swallowed before taking it, and Johnny helped her out of the vehicle. She was so close to him he could smell the vanilla and strawberry scent radiating off her exposed skin. She smelled delicious, and he wondered for a moment what she would taste like. After shutting the door behind her, he offered her his arm, and Izzy took it before Johnny began to lead her inside.

The library was cleared out, and in its stead, there were tables of refreshments, tables and chairs for people to sit down and converse, a deejay and a dance floor. The lights were dim, making the atmosphere more romantic, and upon entering the large building, there was a large banner that congratulated Izzy's class. Many people acknowledged the couple with a look of curiosity. Some even looked both Izzy and Johnny up and down, their eyes filled with interest depending on their gender and who they were looking at.

"What would you like to do?" Izzy asked, tilting her chin up and bringing it closer to him in hopes he could hear her better.

Would "kiss you" be a bad answer? a voice inside of his mind asked quite curiously.

"Whatever you would like to do," he instead responded, and curled his lips up to indicate that he was being sincere in his response.

For the next few hours, Izzy introduced Johnny to her friends and professors. She noticed many women gave her glares, while some looked at him oddly. A few people actually went up to him and asked if he was Johnny Depp. Instead of getting mad, Izzy was glad to see that Johnny was taking it all in stride. They drank water, ate some of the snacks that were offered, and danced.

Though many women were giving the man insinuating stares, Johnny only had eyes for Izzy. He didn't even have to pretend to be completely consumed with her; he was soon realizing it was starting to become natural. Of course, that didn't mean he loved her, but he was beginning to grow accustomed to the feeling of caring for her. The two danced as well, with Izzy teaching him the way people did it here rather than where Johnny was from. Johnny seemed to particularly like the close proximity of dancing, as well as the more provocative moves. As he had assumed, Izzy was quite talented at moving her hips along to the loud beat of any song, but really, there was never any doubt in Johnny's mind.

At around midnight, Izzy led Johnny out the backdoors where there was a small patch of greenery set up for those that wanted privacy. Surprisingly, the two could make out the stars in the sky. Though they were not big, the sky was clear, the moon was full, and the darkness only illuminated their light. Johnny's hand was tucked securely in the small of Izzy's back, and though neither said anything of it, both felt comfortable in the other's presence.

"Thank you," Izzy murmured, turning to look up at him, "for coming with me tonight. Before Zach and I broke up, we were supposed to go together, but..." Her eyes searched his eyes, but she wasn't sure what she was looking for. "...I am sure I had more fun with you than I would have ever had with him."

"Zach is a fool," Johnny told her, his tone slightly on edge at the thought of Zach harming her. He lifted his hand up and placed his fingertip on her cheekbone, tracing the hollow of it. Tilting his head down so his forehead rested on hers gently, he tightened his grip on her waist and pulled her closer to him. He absolutely adored the way her petite, feminine frame fit perfectly against his hard body. "But I should thank him for not being able to be with you tonight..." His tone had turned into a low, husky murmur, as though he was casting a spell on her. Whatever he was doing, it was working.

"Johnny," Izzy said in a breathless tone. Subconsciously, she tilted her head, her eyes going to his lips and she dabbed her lips with her tongue.

Johnny's brow rose at the sight, and his desire to claim her lips became a necessity for him. His eyes slowly closed, and he leaned down even further, but before either could fulfill their desire, the world around them faded into black and the two started to fall.

21

The first thing Johnny did when he felt the odd sensation was wrap his firm arms around Izzy's waist and pull her close against him. He wasn't sure if this was some New World technology or whatnot, and he would be damned if he was going to let her get hurt in any way. As blackness surrounded them, he felt Izzy go limp in his arms and he pushed his brow together, his deep chocolate eyes pooling with concern. What had happen? Why had she slipped into unconsciousness? The falling only lasted a moment until the two hit something soft. Johnny managed to shift his body so she landed on top of him, and he caught most of the brute force. Luckily for him, what he landed on appeared to be some sort of queen-sized bed, with rich, wine-colored covers.

Johnny's grip on the sleeping woman never wavered, but he cocked his head to the side, trying to take in everything he could without shifting around too much. The first thing he caught sight of was a large, wooden desk that appeared to be nailed into the wooden floor. A few papers sat on top of the flat surface, along with a globe of some sort. When he cast his eyes downward, there were four different trunks, also nailed into the wooden floor, that contained various articles of clothing. And finally, he caught sight of a window on the side of a wooden wall, a squared window with sunlight spilling into the room, painted against a clear, blue sky.

Johnny concentrated for a long moment, staring up at the wooden ceiling. Instead of looking for anything, he finally closed his eyes and simply listened and smelled. He could hear the soft lulling of familiar waves ocean meshed with far-off calls that resembled sea gulls. He smelled...freshness, salt. He was on a boat of some kind. He *had* to be. On the ocean. But *where* was he? Somewhere in the new world, or...?

A soft whimper came out of Izzy's slightly parted mouth, but when Johnny looked down to capture her face within his gaze, she looked nothing past peaceful. Without conferring with Johnny's control, a soft smile touched his lips. He realized she was capable of making him happy without doing anything, really. Just her being

alive caused his heart to swell, and he didn't understand why, but he didn't feel that he needed to. Speaking of which, he took his index and middle fingers and pressed them gently on the column of her throat so he could make sure she was alive and her breathing was steady.

It was.

A swell of relief surged through his body and he felt a sigh slip past his lips. He shifted her body slightly so it wasn't on him anymore. However, her head was tucked just underneath his arm, and seemed to fit there almost perfectly. Though Johnny was never one for cuddling, he felt a warm, comfortable sensation with her next to him like this. Now what he needed to find out was where the bloody hell was he?

"The Caribbean," a familiar, silky voice told him.

Now that Johnny could move more easily, his head snapped up and he caught sight of Willow standing in front of the dark oak doors. Her lithe form leaned against the hard wood, and her blue eyes were staring into Johnny's, studying him, as though trying to figure out if she had made the right decision. "In the year seventeen eighteen."

Johnny's brow pushed up so high that if his hair wasn't securely pushed back from his sharp face, they would have become lost behind his shaggy locks. His mouth opened slightly, only enhancing the sharpness of his cheekbones, and his eyes widened slightly. "Oh," he finally managed to say. "And she...?" He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask, but nodded at the sleeping woman before refocusing his gaze back on Willow.

"Though you are not sure what you I want to say, I am," Willow said in her musical voice, her lips curling up in that knowing grin. Johnny refrained from frowning at her words; he was left slightly disgruntled that she seemed to know him better than he knew himself. As though she could read his mind, Willow's smile deepened. "I do not know you better than yourself, Johnny Clover. But to answer your unspoken question, she will remain with you, just as you remained with her."

"She will not...leave me?" he asked her, trying not to sound desperate, but wanting to know the answer nonetheless. "She will not vanish before my eyes?"

"Not unless she so chooses, my friend," she told him, her eyes shining mischievously. "Izzy is not being kept here, in your time,

the same way you were kept in hers.” She paused, tilting her head to the side so her long tresses pooled all around her, making her alabaster skin glow. “It would have done me no good to take away what you truly love and then expect you to lead a fleet of pirates against the King’s Royal Navy.”

“Love?” Johnny asked, genuinely confused as he pushed his brow together. “I don’t love her, Willow. Out of everyone I know, I would have thought *you* would have known that.”

“Don’t you?” she asked, curving a brow up. “How silly of me. Well, I don’t want to give you any unnecessary distractions.” She raised her hand and pointed one long finger in Izzy’s direction, indicating that she was intent on sending Izzy back to where she rightly belonged. “Since you have no claim over her, I will just send her back....” She made a move to do something, but before Johnny could see it, he wrapped his arm tightly around Izzy’s waist, as though he was unwilling to let her go.

“I like her,” Johnny finally allowed, turning his head back to look at Izzy. Her navy blue dress still clung to her body, and though her hair was still pulled tightly into a bun, stray strands fell loose, framing her face. What would happen if she was gone forever, trapped in a different time? He didn’t like the concept one bit. In the time he had known her, he had struck up a friendship with her, the first true one he had come to know. And he wasn’t keen on allowing that to end just yet. “Immensely.”

Willow curled up her lips once again, but pressed the matter no further. He didn’t have to say he loved her to prove that he did; she could see it clearly written in his eyes, even if he could not. “Very well,” she allowed, letting her arm fall gracefully down back to her side.

“Why am I here?” Johnny asked, arching a brow. “I thought I was to learn some sort of lesson, and that someone was supposed to fall in love with me, despite my many, many faults.” He offered her a disarming smile, but Willow was left unaffected, as usual.

“I cannot speak for her,” Willow said, though she made no indication that the woman in love with him was Izzy. Johnny frowned at this thought. It was probably Candace. Rats. “But I believe you misinterpreted the message I longed for you to have learned, Johnny Clover. Without even realizing it, and with some help, however, it has managed to sink in.” She paused for a moment, before her voice turned serious. “I wanted to you to feel

dependence upon somebody other than yourself. That is how the majority of the pirates here, in this world, feel about you and what you are destined to do for your people. They cannot win this war without your help, Johnny Clover. Though I am sure you have not yet come to understand that, I know you realize how important Miss Isabelle is to you.” She paused, fixating her gaze on the sleeping young woman. “Though I did not give the option to you, know that if she truly wishes to leave your side and return back to her time, she will be able to, and there is no coming back. Or going forward, in your case.” Johnny gulped before pressing his lips together. “For you to skirt your responsibility and disappoint those who depend on you was absolutely selfish.” She took two bold steps forward, her face contorted in a scowl. “I should take her away from you, to make you feel what many have felt upon your rejection.”

“I will not let you,” Johnny growled, pushing his brow down as he met her with a challenging look. It took a lot to upset the usually laidback pirate, but Willow always did know exactly what to say to rile him up.

“I figured as much,” Willow said, her face returning to normal as that knowing smile overtook her lips once again. “Which is why I brought her with you. If anything, she will be your inspiration to continue on with what you were meant for.” She looked at the surroundings, pausing for a moment to take it in. “This ship is yours, Johnny. A willing crew awaits your presence for orders. I cannot force you to do what you should, but if you wish to keep your”—Willow smiled at the next word—“friend, then I highly suggest you listen to me. You are to sail to the Atlantic Ocean, where you will be met with a fleet of your backup. The war is stirring; it will start soon. I can only wish you the best of luck.”

“If I go through with this,” Johnny said, casting a quick glance at Izzy, “can you guarantee me that she will not get hurt?”

“I cannot,” the mystic replied honestly. “But I can guarantee you that if you go through with this, I will not take her away from you. If you succeed in your task and claim victory over the Navy, you can do whatever you wish, and she can as well.”

“I’ve never felt this before,” he told her suddenly, as though he wasn’t sure what to make of his mixed and conflicted emotions.

“The glow looks good on you, Johnny Clover,” she told him. “Do not be afraid of something that can make you a good man. And

Miss Isabelle can make you a better man than what was ever expected of you.” Without that, she opened the door and allowed her essence to be carried away by the cool sea breeze, disappearing right before Johnny’s eyes.

He trailed his callused fingertips down the base of her bare spine. Of their own accord, hairs stood erect, following the trail his fingers made. She closed her eyes, arching her back ever so slightly in response to his touch. He, himself, had never seen a more graceful back, and he couldn't take his chocolate brown eyes away from it. Before she realized what he was doing, he leaned towards her and placed a chaste kiss on the crook of her neck. A breathy whimper slid out of her mouth and her head tilted back, giving him more access to her throat.

He didn't take it for granted. He wrapped strong arms around her waist and pulled her closer to him. With skillful fingers, he removed any stray golden tendrils of hair and pushed it over her opposite shoulder so nothing could obstruct his mouth from claiming what was rightfully his. And he wasted no time in doing so. He opened his mouth slightly before placing another kiss in the same spot, this time more hungrily. Her soft moans only encouraged him further, and his grip on her waist tightened possessively.

He dipped his head slightly to kiss her shoulder blade. One of his hands released his hold on her only to trace her bare side up until it cupped her throat. His long fingers caressed the soft skin as his lips claimed another part of her, this time on her shoulder. She felt so soft, so petite in his arms, and he wanted nothing more than to take the rest of his days and make love to her over and over again.

Her eyes had been closed this whole time, only heightening the sensations his mouth and his hands had on her skin. She had never been this aroused before, and that was precisely what he wanted. He wanted to make her feel as though she was the only woman on the planet, at least to him, and bestow upon her every carnal pleasure she could possibly imagine. He was said to be an amazing lover, and she couldn't dispute such a claim when the mere sight of him caused a tremor to ripple through her body, a mere touch to send shivers down to the base of her spine.

His lips continued to leave hot kisses on her back while the hand claiming her throat shifted downwards. Fingertips traced the smooth curve of her collarbone before sliding between the valley of her breasts.

Finally, he captured on of her breasts in his gentle grip, causing her to gasp. Yet her back arched into his touch once again. His fingers began to caress her nipple, which immediately responded by hardening in his warmth. Her head leaned back further so it now rested on the base of his shoulder, giving him even better access to her throat. He growled at such a sight before him before claiming her throat with his greedy mouth, never relenting in his caresses on her breast.

She whimpered almost pitifully. She didn't understand how he could have such an effect on her body, but she knew she didn't want it to stop.

"Johnny," she said breathlessly, managing to open her eyes halfway to catch his darkened eyes with hers. The sight of her brown eyes darkened caused a primal instinct to erupt inside of him. "Make love to me."

Izzy woke up with a start and a painful pulsating taking place between her legs. Her eyes snapped open, only to realize she was not at UCI at the graduation ball, but somewhere with wooden ceilings. She managed to push herself in a sitting position, casting her eyes around the small room she was in. It looked like some sort of cabin one would find in a boat, or something resembling that.

"I see you're awake," a familiar voice murmured from beside her.

Izzy turned her head and saw Johnny sitting beside her on a wooden chair. Relief flooded through her system, but her cheeks were tinted red, remembering the dream she had about him. Johnny immediately saw her reaction upon seeing him, and arched a confused brow.

"Is everything all right?" he asked her slowly, peering down at her.

"Yeah," she managed to say, though her voice was somewhat hoarse. She looked down at Johnny, and found that he had changed clothes into something comparable to what he had been wearing when she first met him. This time, however, his clothing actually looked decent, clean, maybe even new. A white tunic covered his upper body, but was cut low so it revealed a nice portion of a toned chest. A green scarf was wrapped around his waist, and for pants, he was wearing a dark brown pair that came just below his knee. On his feet was a pair of beige boots. However, his hair was still pushed from his face, though there were a few stray locks that fell into his chiseled face.

Johnny studied the woman in front of him for a moment,

catching an odd glint in her eyes, along with her fading red cheeks. There was some unreadable glint in her darkened eyes; it should be familiar to him, but for whatever reason, he couldn't quite put his finger on it. His eyes trailed down to her long neck, graceful shoulders, and her body that was still encased in the beautiful dress. If only she could wear that number for the time being, but then again, he would undoubtedly be distracted when he knew he had to focus, getting this ship to Tortuga. And there would be no way in hell she would wear the dress in Tortuga. Not if she wanted to stay safe.

"You should get changed into something more comfortable, darling," Johnny suggested softly, perking his brow as his eyes met hers once more. A new blush caressed Izzy's cheeks only because after such a dream, the words could be misconstrued. Johnny noticed this, and paused, but after a moment, said nothing about his observations. "There are two chests here, filled with clothing for you."

Izzy pushed her brow together, but swung her legs over the side of the bed to stand. "Where are we?" she asked, her eyes searching the inside of the room once again. She recognized absolutely nothing in here, not familiar in the slightest with this environment.

"A ship," Johnny replied simply before gesturing at the two chests that belonged to her. Izzy knelt down when she reached them and proceeded to go through the different styles of clothing. "In the eighteenth century," the pirate added.

Izzy's eyes snapped into Johnny's. "What?" she asked, nearly falling over herself at the surprise. "Why? How did we get here?"

Johnny began to caress his fingers together, a habit he did when he was nervous. "Well," he began, trying to keep his voice as casual as it could be. "The lesson I was to have learned in your time, I learned."

"Obviously," Izzy said as she tried to control her patience. "But *why* am I here?"

Johnny shrugged, not keen on telling her the real reason she was here. She was his muse, inspiration to do what he was supposed to do. Of course, Izzy wouldn't understand what a necessity she was; in fact, she might make him out to be selfish for bringing her along. Which he absolutely was not.

"I'm not exactly sure, love," he finally told her. "Maybe you should ask the Fates, hmm?"

Izzy sighed, sitting down on the hard wood floor. Sadness pooled into her eyes as she stared at the open chest in front of her, though it was clear to Johnny she was not seeing the object before her.

“Are you all right?” he asked warily, mentally bracing himself for what might come.

“I just wish,” she murmured, finally looking up at him. “I just wish I could have had a chance to say goodbye.” She paused for a moment, searching through both trunks before grabbing some pants and a tunic to change into, and then pushed herself into a standing position. “I mean, I understand why it wouldn’t have mattered to you if you could say goodbye or not; you didn’t have friends here, didn’t have anyone you really cared about. But I did, and I just...”

Johnny came to stand beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her to him. “You have me here, darling,” he told her, coiling his fingers around her shoulder. “And you are someone I truly care about. I can promise that while you are with me, I will protect you to my fullest capabilities. You have my word.”

Izzy smiled at the sincerity in his words. “I guess,” she murmured before looking at him. “Yeah, I’m glad you’re with me. I don’t know what I would do if they sent me here alone.”

“You get to be a pirate,” Johnny pointed out with a teasing grin.

“But you said piracy isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Izzy murmured, arching a brow. Johnny gave her a blank stare, not quite understanding her words. Izzy chuckled, before biting her bottom lip. “And I will be the fiercest pirate in the Spanish Main!” she exclaimed.

Johnny tried to contain an amused smile. “As you say.”

Izzy suddenly realized just how close the two of them were, which only caused flashes of her dream to scatter throughout her mind. She quickly weaseled out of his grasp before spinning around and facing him. “Right,” she said, her cheeks red once again. Johnny idly wondered just what she was thinking about to cause her to flush so much. “I have to get changed, which means you have to leave.”

“Are you sure you won’t be needing help?” Johnny asked, pressing his brows up.

“Out!” Izzy exclaimed, causing Johnny’s face to fall.

“Oh, all right,” he said, heading for the door. “You are

absolutely no fun, my dear.”

Izzy hid a smile as she watched him exit the cabin. As long as she smiled, she wouldn't be crying.

23

Izzy looked down at the clothing she picked out to change into, and for a moment, frowned. She had just been torn from her home, a place she had known for twenty-two years of her life. An emptiness seemed to wedge itself in her heart, but for whatever reason, it didn't hurt as badly as she originally thought it would. Her parents were more concerned with her older brother than they had ever been with her, and she had just gotten out of her relationship with Zach a month and a half ago. Besides Bex and Brian, she really didn't have anyone or anything she was attached to. And knowing Bex, the redheaded spitfire would figure out what happened to her.

At least she had Johnny with her. Johnny had arrived in her time with no one. So yes, she was quite grateful she had Johnny with her.

It was then that she realized she couldn't reach the zipper of her dress. Blushing slightly, Izzy set the clothes on the desk before quietly making her way outside. She became momentarily distracted with the beautiful scenery, the clear Caribbean water, the high sun shining on the beautiful day... She turned, and much like the first night with Johnny, nearly ran into the pirate captain.

Currently, he was sitting down with his knees up, leaning against the cabin frame. A tri-corn hat sat on his head, but dipped down to cover the upper half of his face. Izzy was caught breathless for a moment at the sheer beauty of the resting man, his cheekbones jutting out like glaciers, just begging to be caressed by soft fingertips. His lips were in a small frown, but his face was relaxed enough that Izzy doubted he was fretting about anything. She detected bits of his dark hair peeking through the side of the hat, but his face took up the majority of the view. His nose sprang out from the hat's precipice, and Izzy captured it. Ever since she first laid eyes on the man, she had this odd fascination with his nose, and even now, it was hard to look away.

But she had to get unchanged, lest members of Johnny's crew spot her in this number. After another self-indulgent moment of taking the man in, Izzy cleared her throat. Johnny reached up with

his left hand, placing his hand on top of the hat. The sleeve of his white tunic fell back, revealing a nice forearm, before pulling the hat off and looking at the woman in front of him with an enigmatic expression in those dark eyes. For a moment, he simply stared at her, taking in every contour of her face.

"I highly suggest you change your clothing, darling," Johnny told her when he realized she was still wearing that navy blue dress. "I fear the pirates aboard may not be as friendly or as gentlemanly as I am."

Izzy pressed her lips together in hopes to contain the disbelieving grin from slipping onto her face. Instead she arched a brow and cocked her head to the side. "Would you mind?" she finally asked him, turning so that Johnny stared up at her slender back. "I can't seem to reach my zipper."

Johnny pushed himself up after dropping the hat next to him. He took a long moment to simply stare at her feminine frame, his dark eyes capturing everything her back had to offer him. How he longed to kiss every inch of her soft skin, to run his hands down her curvaceous sides; how he wanted to bury himself in her long hair. His breathing came out smoothly from his nose and seared across her body, causing her hair to spring alive. The left corner of his lips curled up when he noticed that he was affecting her just as much as she affected him. Finally, he reached up and took the contraption into his hands before slowly pulling it down. He let his fingertips follow the trail the zipper left, caressing the line of her spine. The zipper ended where her hips began, and he found a feeling of disappointment surge through himself.

He lingered next behind her for a moment longer, noticing that she knew he was finished and still stayed close to him. Johnny leaned forward, the tip of his chin brushing the top of her shoulder as he told her in a husky voice, "There you are, love." He inhaled her scent, filling himself up with it. No matter where she was or what she was doing, she always managed to smell amazing. "Unzipped."

"Thank you," she said, her voice quiet in hopes that Johnny wouldn't hear the unsure shakiness.

When she was safely back in the room, she slipped out of the dress and into the clothing she grabbed. For whatever reason, the clothes seemed to fit her quite beautifully. The black pants clung to her legs, stopping just where her knees began. The tunic she was

wearing was a sage green color, and was a bit looser on her frame than the pants. She wished she had some sort of bra to hold up her breasts, but instead there were supportive undershirts. She took a moment to make sure that every bit was securely in place in hopes to avoid a wardrobe malfunction. When she finished, she searched around for some socks but only found white stockings. After slipping them on, she put on brown boots that molded to her feet perfectly, as though someone knew she was coming to this time, this ship, at this moment. The last thing she did was untie her hair from the tight bun, and rake her fingers through the locks as best as she could.

“Finally,” she heard Johnny mutter as soon as she stepped out of the cabin. His eyes lit up when he took her in, however, and he threw her a roguish smile. “Well, look at you, love. Every inch the pirate, if you ask me. Everything fit all right?” he asked, arching a brow, though his eyes knew perfectly well that it did. In fact, he wasn’t so sure he wanted her to be introduced to the crew in such fitted pants. Even the tunic that was loose on her frame still revealed she had an admirable body.... Maybe she should wait in his cabin while he met the crew by himself.

“Actually, yes,” Izzy said, smiling in return. “I feel really comfortable.”

“Oh,” Johnny said, cocking his head to the side. “Well, good. I suppose you want to meet everybody then?”

Izzy furrowed her brow. “Yeah...” She let her voice trail off, confused at the obvious doubt in his face. “Why?”

“Just stay close to me, all right?” Johnny said, his voice laced with firmness Izzy hadn’t heard before. Her eyes caught hold of his and there was a seriousness buried deep down in his dark orbs that she had not seen before. “The pirates in your movies are far different than the pirates I know. I don’t want you harmed in any way.”

Izzy said nothing, and instead nodded. She followed closely behind Johnny as he confidently strode over to the helm of the ship. As the two made their way, Izzy noticed an array of various frames occupying the ship. They began to look over at her and Johnny with confusion, maybe even curiosity as they watched the two step onto the helm.

“Gents!” Johnny announced, looking over every pirate he could see. His face was completely serious, unwavering, and Izzy couldn’t

help but stare. His presence, when he wanted it to be, was simply amazing. For someone who had said he had never had a crew before, he certainly knew how to act the role of the captain. "It would seem that I am captain of this vessel and you are all part of my crew." He paused, hoping the men listening to him knew the grave situation they had gotten themselves into. "If you are here, I am sure you know what we are about to embark on. Some of you may not return. To be honest, I have never had a crew before, although I have sailed numerous ships across the Seven Seas by myself. I would like to thank you in advance for your sacrifice, but before we continue on about our day, we should probably introduce ourselves and lay down some rules."

"We know who ye be," a voice in the back called. "You're Johnny Clover, a clever pirate, but a coward nonetheless. You ran away."

"Why did you come back, anyways?" another voice asked.

"And who is she?" yet another asked, indicating Izzy.

"Her name is Isabelle," Johnny told the crew, "and she is not to be harmed, touched, nothing. If I find out any of you do such things to her, I will drop you off on a godforsaken spit of land with naught but a pistol and water. Do you hear me?" He paused, waiting for the affirmative before continuing. "I understand why you may not take me seriously as your captain, but I hope that soon I will earn your trust. We are about to embark on the adventure of our lives, and without trust, we may not survive it."

By the time the ship reached the docks of Tortuga, the sun had just set on the horizon. During that time, Izzy had taken the opportunity to get to know each member of the crew, their names, and some of their backstories. Johnny was firmly at the helm, his eyes primarily focused on the direction the ship was heading in. Of course, as Izzy always managed to do, the only times his eyes left his focus were when he managed to catch sight of her. She always managed to make him smile in some way without even trying, and even now, he could tell she was currently charming the members of his crew. And she didn't even know it.

She was a weapon in its deadliest form, and the only reason Johnny felt his whole belief system shaken to its core.

But he didn't want to think about that just then.

When the ship sailed smoothly into the west docks, Johnny glanced over at his crew. "Gents," he said, giving the group that had gathered around him a respectful nod. "As you can see, we are in Tortuga." He paused, his lips curling into a frown, his eyes searching the wooden deck for what he should say next. After a moment, he continued. "As I'm sure you're all aware, I've never actually had a crew before, so being a captain is still a new experience for me. However, I can assure you that if anything, I try to be fair. As long as you can assure me that the ship will be properly stocked before we leave tomorrow morning, and that when we do, you will all be of sound mind, you may disperse freely for the evening."

The crew seemed pleased by this, and each murmured or nodded their assurances to their new captain before walking off the ship. When Johnny caught Izzy's eyes, he waved her over before coiling his arm around her shoulder and pulling her tightly against him. "Now, darling," he murmured lowly, so that only she could hear, "it is imperative that you listen to me closely." He started to lead her off of the ship, but kept her body close to his. "Tortuga is a wonderful town, a blessed place for beings like me—pirates, scallywags, buccaneers, thieves—"

“Ladies of the night?” Izzy asked with a teasing smile before arching her brow. “Yes, I know, Johnny. I’ve seen *Pirates of the Caribbean*.”

“Because that movie captured Tortuga’s essence perfectly,” Johnny mumbled dryly under his breath. “Yes, well, Tortuga seems to be charming and alluring and whatnot, but believe me when I say it is probably one of the most dangerous places for those who are daft and those who are new visitors. You must promise me when I ask you to stay close to me, and...” He paused, hesitating a bit. “Don’t take this the wrong way, love, but women from your time and women from my time are quite different. I know you are strong, opinionated, and quite the wit, but please...watch your tongue around the lads here. They tend to take things personally. Trust me; I know from experience.” He gazed back down at her, his eyes serious as they bore down into his. “Especially since you are a member of the fairer sex, their pride might be wounded and, to put it frankly, they would have no problem wounding you, no matter how charming or beautiful you are.”

Izzy tried to read his eyes at that moment, almost forgetting to walk due to the surprise at Johnny’s words. “You think I am beautiful?” she asked softly, furrowing her brow.

“My opinion of you doesn’t matter at this juncture, darling,” Johnny said, easily evading the question. “What I need from you now before we get off these docks is your word you’ll watch your tongue and stay close.”

“I promise,” she told him, and she meant it.

For the next hour, Johnny led her down the streets of Tortuga, pointing out the pubs he was personally familiar with and enjoyed, while pointing out the ones that didn’t particularly like his company and the ones she had to stay away from, either due to service or bad alcohol.

Izzy was probably as captivated by the scenery as Johnny was when he walked down a street in Balboa Island. The people were so different here; their clothes and the styles they wore. But what struck Izzy the most was how forward they were. Men leered at her with blatant obviousness, and she was glad for Johnny’s arm wrapped tightly around her. Women, dressed up in bawdy-colored clothing with their breasts all but hanging out and their faces painted much like a clown’s, whistled or catcalled in any man’s direction, hoping to get lucky that evening. She saw men sleeping

off their drunkenness, while others seemed to have made a home on the dirty streets of the town. Though the night was thick, merchants were still selling odd things, and Johnny pointed out who to buy from and who to stay away from. He seemed very proud of the town, and especially excited to be the person to show her around.

"It's more than I ever expected," she told him after the quick tour, gazing up at him with honesty clearly written in her eyes. "The movie... It couldn't capture the essence that is Tortuga."

Johnny seemed delighted at such an observation, and curled his lips up to show his approval. "Aye," he agreed, nodding once. "I've been trying to tell you that, you know." He glanced away, and continued to head to his favorite pub on Tortuga. "Now, love, you are in for quite a treat. The Siren's Song has the best rum in all of the Caribbean."

"I thought you preferred wine," Izzy pointed out as she walked through the door Johnny was holding open for her. For a moment, the two were silent. Johnny led her over to a far corner of the room and to his usual place, and the two sat down.

"I do," he told her, following her inside, "but beggars can't be choosers when it comes to Tortuga. Only in brothels do they serve wine here, and I don't think you would appreciate it very much if I took you to one of those."

"Like it would matter," Izzy muttered under her breath as she noticed women in revealing dresses immediately start to eye Johnny like a hungry dog might eye a piece of meat. Apparently they didn't seem to notice Izzy's presence because three of them started to head over to the couple.

"Is that jealousy I'm detecting in your tone, darling?" he asked her, his eyes sparkling to emphasize his point.

"Why would I be jealous of them?" Izzy asked, scoffing as she did so. "They're—"

Johnny finally noticed that the women were heading towards them at that moment because his lips curled down, and for a minute, he was unsure of what to do. Before he could think of anything, however, they stood before them.

"Johnny!" they all seemed too coo at exactly the same time, interrupting Izzy. She frowned at this, her brow descending so low that it nearly overlapped her eyes.

Why would she be jealous of whores? They were whores, for goodness' sake; there was no reason for her to be jealous of them.

Okay, now her mind was babbling and becoming repetitive, which was definitely not a good sign. As Izzy watched the scene unfold in front of her, she noticed that two of the whores had managed to weasel their way onto his lap while one chose to remain behind him in order to properly massage his back. She didn't know why, but she forced herself to look away, and instead, tried to focus on the fascinating scene before her of two drunken men about to get into some sort of brawl. However, though she tried not to think about it, the women currently decorating Johnny's lap were certainly making it hard as they spoke about how much they missed him and what they longed to do with him if only he would spare a moment of his time, and blah, blah, blah.

Oddly enough, Johnny had no interest in the three women vying for his attention. Of course, that didn't stop him from not getting rid of them immediately, but he knew he wasn't going anywhere that evening in their company. His eyes managed to seek out Izzy's face, but after studying it, found the expression to be highly enigmatic. A feeling he was beginning to get familiar with seeped through his body. He recognized it from before, and pursed his lips when he realized it was guilt.

But he had done nothing wrong....

And yet, the look on her face...

"Ladies, ladies," Johnny said, tearing his gaze away from Izzy to look back at the women sitting on him. "If you had not noticed, I am actually here with somebody, so your services will not be needed tonight. Thank you, though."

"Are you sure we cannot sway you?" the woman in red purred, offering him an alluring smile.

"I'm afraid not," Johnny said, "but thank you for asking. Now, if you please..." He let his voice trail off, raising his brow at them expectantly. The women didn't need to be told twice. Even though they knew Johnny Clover was an admirable lover, they weren't going to tempt him when he couldn't be tempted. Instead, they sought out other men who could guarantee them a sale.

"Aren't you the popular one," Izzy murmured, looking over at Johnny. She seemed relieved to see that he had sent them away.

"It's to be expected when it comes to the fairer sex," he said with an arrogant grin. He glanced over his shoulder at a nearby bar wench. "Oy, lass!" he called. "Can I get two rums here?"

"Two?" Izzy asked, furrowing her brow. "But I don't drink,

Johnny!”

“You’re in Tortuga, love!” he exclaimed, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Live a little, hmm?”

"I hate rum."

Johnny smirked at the deadpan tone laced in Izzy's voice, and her eyes flashed gold, emphasizing her seriousness. He had talked her into drinking a few sips, promising it took a while to get used to the beverage. Six sips later and a glare that seemed to deepen after every one, he finally relented and promised he believed the fact that she may not be quite as fond of the drink as he was. Johnny was on his second glass, and although it wasn't his choice of drink, he was fond of the amber liquid, reveling in the way the warm liquid heated his mouth and trailed down his throat.

"What would you like to drink in its stead then, darling?" Johnny asked, perking his brow up as he looked at her over the rim of his mug.

"Water," Izzy said with a firm nod. "Do you think they have water?"

"Course they have water," he told her before glancing around. When he caught sight of the same bar wench, he whistled sharply to catch her attention. "Oy, lass!" he called. "Could I trouble you for a glass of water?"

"Water?" the wench asked, pushing her brows up in disbelief.

"For the lady," Johnny explained, raising his palm horizontally so it indicated Izzy's presence.

"Water," the wench muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes and heading over to the bar.

"You know," Izzy began, finally taking her eyes off of the retreating figure to look into Johnny's brown eyes, "it seems that my presence is ignored whenever you are speaking to somebody, like I'm invisible or something." She paused for a moment, tilting her head slightly to the side. An unreadable smile began to curve her lips upward and Johnny easily detected the curious sparkle in her eyes. "Why would you ever want to run away from here, Johnny? You seem to be one of the most popular pirates here. Men and women alike look at you with admiration, hookers can't wait to sink their nails into you, as though you're the greatest lover they've

ever experienced—”

“I *am* the greatest lover they have ever experienced,” Johnny said, cutting her off. He didn’t speak for a moment, but instead leaned further over the table in order to reach out and curl an errant strand of golden hair behind her ear. “You know, love, I could give you the greatest pleasure you have ever imagined. I could do things to your body Zach would never even think to do you.” His voice had lowered substantially, becoming silky and husky, causing Izzy’s skin to break out in goose bumps.

Izzy made sure to maintain eye contact with the pirate in front of her, though she knew if she wanted to look away, she wouldn’t be able to. He had captivated her underneath his spell, and she highly doubted it was because his finger was still touching her cheek. How she longed to take him up on his offer, how she longed to feel him connect to her in such a way... She felt herself becoming flushed and she pulled away as she cleared her throat.

“That very well may be true,” she said, and frowned when she realized her voice came out shakier than she originally intended, “but...that was not my question.” Johnny threw her a charming smile, knowing full well how he was affecting her, and tilted his head to the side so shaggy dark hair fell into his face. Though the sight was heart-stopping, Izzy forced herself to go on. “Why would you want to give all of that up? What are you running away from?”

The question caught Johnny off-guard, and he wasn’t sure how—if at all—he was going to answer it. To be honest, he had never really thought about it, but now that she was forcing himself to, he began to try and figure out why. It took a good five minutes before Johnny finally responded. “I don’t like responsibility,” he told her. “I don’t like people depending on me.”

“But *what* are you running away from?” Izzy asked, not yet understanding. “What are people depending on you for?”

“A battle is about to play out, darling,” he told her, his tone serious, his brown eyes burning into hers. “Pirates and the Royal Navy have been enemies since the dawn of time, and will continue to be as such. A war between them is supposed to happen in a matter of weeks.”

“And you’re supposed to lead the pirates into battle?” Izzy guessed. When Johnny nodded, she frowned. “But why? Why you?”

“It is as they say,” Johnny said, shrugging his shoulders and giving her a somewhat lazy look. “Some people are born into

greatness, while others have greatness thrust upon them. I happen to fall in the latter category.”

The bar wench came back with a mug of water and set it down for Izzy before walking away. “Just because greatness is thrust upon you,” Izzy told him, “doesn’t mean you’re not great.” She gave him a smile. “I have faith in you. I know that whatever you need to accomplish, you can.”

“How can you possibly believe in me when I don’t believe in myself?” Johnny asked, running his fingers through his hair. “My entire life, I’ve learned to depend on myself and nobody else, and now nearly every pirate is depending on me. I felt like I had to run away.... I don’t like this pressure. Why can’t somebody else do it?”

“Because they can’t,” Izzy said simply. “Johnny, because of your disappearance, a lot of pirates are going to be upset with you.”

“And a lot of pirates don’t believe in me either,” Johnny said. “They would rather I not lead them into war at all.”

“If not you, then who?” Izzy asked, furrowing her brow.

Johnny shrugged. “Anyone who is not me, obviously,” he drawled, before sighing through his nose. He hadn’t ever shared any of his doubts with anybody, but it felt good to finally unload some of them.

“Can I see your hand?” she asked him.

“What?”

“Your hand,” Izzy said, reaching out across the table. Johnny frowned, clearly unsure, but placed his large hand in her smaller one. She looked down at it, admiring the long, callused fingers. After a moment, she looked up in order to catch Johnny’s eyes in hers. “Don’t you see, Johnny? All of your dreams lie in the palm of your hand. You’re capable of doing whatever you want if you could only believe in them.” She paused, looking down at their connected hands for a long moment. “But if you can’t, I’ll just believe in you for you.”

“Why?” Johnny asked, his voice lower due to its seriousness. “Why do you have faith in me?”

“Faith is beyond any explanation, Johnny,” she told him, her voice just as low. “I just believe in you.”

Before Izzy realized it, Johnny turned his hand so his fingers could wrap around her wrist and he pulled her towards him. It took her by surprise when she felt his lips touch hers, but she closed her eyes and a very soft whimper escaped from her mouth. Upon

hearing it, a primitive instinct took over Johnny and his grip tightened on her, a growl erupting in the bowels of his throat. Her lips were softer than he could imagine, and for a moment, he was completely mesmerized by her entire essence that managed to consume him without even realizing it. He longed to continue doing this for a long time, but a crowded pub was not the place to do so.

When he regrettably had to let her lips go in order to breathe, he opened his eyes in order to stare at her. She had never appeared to be as beautiful as she was in that moment. Though the kiss was soft and chaste, it left him with the desire for more. If he did nothing else in the world, he wanted to kiss Izzy once again, maybe even for the rest of his life. He was suddenly aware that he wanted nobody else except the woman in front of him. The thought scared him, but at that moment, he didn't particularly care.

"I've been wanting to do that for a very long time," he murmured, his voice husky once again.

"Well," Izzy said, a very light blush tainting her cheek. "I'm glad you did, then."

At that moment, somebody wrapped their arms around Izzy and pulled her from the bench while another man placed the tip of a sword to her throat.

"Well, well, well," the man holding Izzy said, his beady black eyes focusing solely on Johnny. "Look 'ho decided ter come back."

"An' look what he brought wit' 'im," the man holding the sword murmured.

"Ah," Johnny said, slowly standing. "Pollock and Murphy. How surprising." Though he tried to keep his voice controlled, his eyes clearly betrayed how worried he really was. "Let her go or I will chop both of you to bits and pieces and serve you to the fishies."

"I don't think so, Johnny," the first man said before two men appeared from behind Johnny and took his arms so the pirate could not even attempt to rescue the woman. "We don't want ye ter be leadin' our kind to our deaths, and ter show how serious we be, we want you to watch."

"Watch what?" Johnny asked, slight hesitation in his voice. He didn't want to ask, but wasn't sure what else he could do. If *anything* happened to Izzy, he would carry out his threat without a second thought.

However, none of the men responded. Instead, they looked at Izzy before looking back at Johnny, and both smiled enigmatically.

It was probably the most excruciating fifteen minutes of Johnny's life. The two men who had Izzy had taken her outside, vanishing into the night. The two men holding onto Johnny followed, but due to the darkness that currently consumed the sky, it was hard to see. He couldn't even hear her, and that's what upset him the most. Johnny did everything in his power to escape from the man holding him captive, but while Johnny was taller than they were, they were much stronger.

He found out later that the reason they had done this to him in the first place was because he had run away from his duties. He had indirectly caused the death of numerous pirates due to the Navy's stricter laws and punishments concerning those that flew jolly rogers rather than colors. They wanted to take something dear to him and hurt it as much as they were hurting. They wanted Johnny to feel their pain.

When they were finally finished, they pushed Johnny into an abandoned alleyway, where the pirate nearly tripped over something. On second glance, he realized that it was Izzy. He couldn't quite tell what they had done to her, but he could tell she was hurt. Badly. Cocking his head to the side, he placed his ear to her chest to make sure she was still breathing.

Barely, he realized.

Suddenly, everything he knew and adored and favored didn't matter anymore. Johnny's shaky fingers reached up and buried themselves in his locks of dark hair. He had to think of something quickly; he couldn't just stay out here with Izzy in this condition. But where? He couldn't take her back to the scrag. People knew it was his usual hangout, as they had said in the New World, and anyone who wanted to inflict harm on him the way those four men had could easily do so. There were many inns scattered across Tortuga, but none would have the proper medical supplies one would need to fix her up and—

What if she died here?

The thought came into his mind before he could stop it, but it

sunk deep into him until he thought about it. She wasn't even here for twelve hours, and already Izzy was in a battered state. He had been in her world for nearly two months and the only pain he felt was when he saw the look on Izzy's face after catching him in the supply closet with Candy. He knew it was more dangerous here, but he thought...he thought...

Before he could stop them, Johnny's dark eyes grew misty. He couldn't even watch her properly. Already ten hours in his time, under his care, and she was fighting off death. Would she...? Not if he could help it.

"Come on, man," he muttered to himself, blinking all traces of sentimentality away from his eyes.

What about the ship?

He couldn't take her back there. He had no idea where everything was, and even if he did, he highly doubted they had medical supplies stocked.

So, no inns, pubs, ships... What else was on the island? He had no friends who lived here, so a house was out of the question....

Johnny's eyes looked desperately out of the alley, hoping to find inspiration somewhere. He was Johnny Clover, for crying out loud! He always managed to weasel out of death; he could find somewhere to take Izzy, couldn't he? All he could see were the flashes of the women's dresses, the silhouette of the sea, the...

Well, he did know *one* place to take her....

* * *

To say that Madame Bouvier was surprised would most certainly be an understatement. She hadn't seen the likes of Johnny Clover in her brothel for quite a while, at least where the pirate was concerned. In fact, if she had to put a time frame on it, she hadn't seen Johnny here for a couple of months, give or take. And to see him standing at her door with a battered woman in his arms and a look of complete desolation...well, she couldn't quite find a suitable label for the current emotions she felt.

However, the older woman always had a soft spot for Johnny, and he had always been one of her best customers. Her girls had taken to him as well, but that was to be expected. He was handsome, charming, and a fantastic lover, and he was going to

lead pirates into a fierce battle with the Navy. He always looked so cool, so confident, as though he knew exactly what he was doing, and if he didn't, he could fake it easily enough. As the Madame looked at him now, she realized how lost he was.

"Please," he said, his voice throaty. "You have to help."

Madame Bouvier nodded once and stepped aside, allowing the pirate to come inside the brothel. "Go to the third floor," she instructed him, her French accent lacing through every word. "There's a spare bedroom there. I'll get the supplies you need to fix her."

Johnny all but dashed up the three stories, wary of Izzy's unconscious form in his arms. He didn't want to hurt her in any way, but he wanted to get her to a bedroom, somewhere comfortable, as quickly as he could. He entered the first bedroom he could find. It was brighter in here, with lamps filled with candle flames scattered in the room. Johnny gently placed Izzy on top of the bed, knowing that to dress her wounds he would have to dispose of the clothes she was wearing. Perhaps Marion Bouvier had some extra articles of clothing she could borrow when he had finished.

He stared deeply at the young woman. It hurt him to know that somebody could do this to her to get back to him. Johnny curled an errant strand of hair behind her ear, letting his fingertip caress a portion of unmarked skin. Whatever those men did to her, it was brutal. He grit his teeth tightly, anger taking over worry now that he knew he was able to care for her somewhere safe. If he ever got his hands on those men again, he would make good on his promise. He had no qualms about chopping them up into little pieces and feeding them to the animals that occupied the sea.

Johnny's breath hitched in his throat. She would survive this, wouldn't she? She had to. He couldn't bear the thought of realizing his feelings for her and then losing her. He wouldn't even let himself think of such a notion.

"Knock knock," a voice called. Johnny immediately recognized it as Marion Bouvier's, and though he didn't respond, she entered anyways. "I have supplies for you, Johnny. Rum, hot and dry towels, bandages..." She let her voice trail off as she caught the utter look of worry in his chocolate brown eyes. "Anything else you might need?"

"A change of clothes for her," Johnny said, going over to the

supplies. "Something loose, if you have it, please."

"Of course," Marion said, nodding before disappearing out the door once again.

Johnny began to survey the wounds, and from what he could see, nothing looked too drastic. No cut was dangerously deep so it didn't seem necessary to wake her in order to clean the wounds. Before he undressed her, he swallowed and hesitated for a moment. He had always been skillful when it came to disrobing members of the fairer sex, but she was different. He had known so from the moment he had laid eyes upon her. Johnny had always imagined undressing her, but never in such a setting. Despite this, he knew he had to make sure everything was clean.

Marion helped him when she returned, and in the next hour, every wound was dressed and Izzy was wearing a loose tunic and pantaloons. Though she was breathing, she had not woken up throughout the aid her body was being given. Johnny wasn't sure if this was good or not. He tried not to think about it as he worked, but when he had finished, it was the only thing on his mind.

Marion seemed to have read his obvious distress, for she placed a comforting hand on his forearm. "As long as she is breathing," she told him in her silky voice, "there is hope."

Johnny glanced over at the woman, who was currently taking a seat next to him. Johnny, himself, was in a chair on the side of the bed with no plans to leave Izzy's side any time soon. He said nothing, however, but his eyes seemed to say it all. He knew that what she had said was correct, but it didn't make him feel better when she was still unconscious.

"May I ask," Marion began, unsure if Johnny would take any offense to her question. "Who is she?"

Johnny sighed through his nose. How to explain Izzy to anyone? It was too complicated. So, he decided to go with the simplest answer he could muster. "She is the woman I love," he told her.

It was also the truest.

It had been four days when Izzy finally opened her eyes and kept them open. She felt comfortable, noticing covers wrapped around her body, a fluffy pillow underneath her head—and there was the pain. Oh God, the excruciating pain. What had happened, exactly? What did she remember? She closed her eyes once again, but as she thought about it, a lulling ache started to pulsate in the back of her head. She stifled a groan, but continued to focus.

Izzy knew she was in the eighteenth century, and if she had to guess, probably in the early seventeen hundreds—when the Age of Piracy was thriving. Johnny had been showing her around Tortuga, and then took her into a pub where she could try rum, a drink she had no fondness for. Whores had been trying to get his attention, but Johnny didn't seem interested.... They were talking, and then they—

Oh shit. They kissed. They *kissed*.

And then... She frowned as her eyes snapped back open. Men had grabbed her and others had grabbed Johnny so he couldn't get to her. They had...they had taken her into the darkness, outside, where they began to—

She shut her eyes again. She didn't want to remember. All she would say was that it was bad.

It was then that Izzy realized there was slight pressure around her waist. She frowned and glanced down, but due to the fact that the room she was currently in was dark, she couldn't make anything out. She sighed through her nose in slight frustration, and instead, glanced to her side.

Johnny.

Johnny was lying next to her, completely and fully in slumber. His profile was sharp and relaxed. There was no worry, no anger, no flirtatious looks touching his features. He was completely calm and incredibly handsome in the shadows. He was here with her. Somehow, he had gotten her out of her trouble, brought her somewhere... He was with her. Johnny was lying next to her, his hand wrapped around her waist.... She was so happy. She was so...

relieved...

But now, she needed to find the restroom.

Izzy tried to slip out of Johnny's grasp, but even in his sleep, he must have known what she was up to because his grip only tightened around her. She pushed her lips together to contain her giggles, and after a few more tries, managed to break free from the pirate. Johnny didn't seem to like this because his brow pushed down and his lips curled into a frown, but he didn't wake up. She smiled at the sight, trying not to let herself feel the pain as she stood up. It took her a long moment to get her balance, and though her knees were slightly shaky and she felt as though she might collapse, she managed to stay upright.

Now...to find the restroom.

As silently as she could, she walked across the room and opened the bedroom before opening it and slipping through the door frame. The first thing she noticed was the nice, wooden walls. They had to be in a house of some sort, not a ship. But where could they possibly be? This place seemed too nice for the likes of Tortuga....

Izzy cut her musings short as she searched for some sort of restroom. It took a few tries until she reached the correct room, and after doing her business, she stepped out, resuming her thoughts about where Johnny had brought her. Maybe this was his home. Maybe he had a home here on Tortuga. But... Something tickled her intuitive senses, telling her that while Johnny seemed comfortable here, he didn't exactly own this place. When she found a case of stairs, she cautiously proceeded to head downwards. Nobody seemed to be awake yet, but after peering out a window, she knew it had to be at least six, seven o'clock in the morning. Izzy realized she had been staying on a third floor, so she continued to head down the stairs until she reached the bottom.

The young woman paused for a moment, tightening her grasp on the stair's banister so she could temporarily rest her body. Though the pain wasn't as searing, it was still strenuous to move after some time in bed. At the thought, she frowned. How long was she out, exactly? How many days had passed since that night?

Before she could ponder such a thought, voices coming from her left distracted her. They sounded...feminine...not dangerous, in the least. So, after another moment, she headed over down a hallway and into what appeared to be a dining room. Three different women sat around a nicely made table with tea cups set in front of each of

them. They all seemed happy, chuckling and smiling. Even though it was early in the morning, they still managed to look beautiful, which caused Izzy to wonder just how badly she looked at that moment.

The woman sitting at the head of the table was the first to notice her. She had straight black hair pulled up into an intricately designed bun, smooth ivory skin, and clear, turquoise eyes. Her lips were full, her figure slender. She was wearing a sage green dress that revealed the curves of her body. When her eyes caught Izzy's, she smiled warmly at the young woman.

"*Bonjour*," she greeted in flawless French. Izzy felt the other two women look her way, and as subtly as she could, she tried to swallow her nervousness. "My name is Marion," she said, her accent thick. "You have had all of us worried here. Please. You should sit." She swept her arm gracefully at the empty chair to her right, and looked at her with a kind gaze of expectancy.

Izzy hesitated for a moment, but nodded a couple of times and took the offered seat. She smiled humbly, and blinked a couple of times before looking at Marion. She was exquisite. "I," she said, and blushed, her voice croaking. "I'm Isabelle, but you can call me Izzy."

"Oh, I know," Marion said as she looked at Izzy with the same smile on her face. "Johnny has told me so much about you."

"All good things, I hope," Izzy mumbled, a light pink caress touching the tips of her cheeks. She folded her arms on the surface of the table as a soft smile touched her lips.

"*Ah, oui*," Marion assured the young woman, nodding her head a couple of times. "He never mentioned the way you speak, though. Very different. Where are you from?"

"Oh," Izzy said, reaching up and itching the back of her head, a nervous habit she had picked up when she was younger. "Far away from here. My accent is found in some places in the Americas."

"Of course," Marion said.

"So this is the woman Johnny brought in?" the woman in the blue dress asked, her blue eyes enhanced due to the color of the dress. She had a thick Cockney accent.

"*Oui*," Marion affirmed. "Ah, Izzy," she said, trying out the foreign name and after a moment, the woman decided that she liked it. "This is Sarah." She motioned towards the woman in blue. "And this is Gabriella." She motioned to the woman with dark eyes,

wearing a pink dress.

“How did you meet Johnny?” the woman in pink asked, and based on her accent, Izzy assumed she was from Spain.

“Well,” Izzy said, touching the tip of her finger to the point of her chin. “He was kind of looking at me when I was...indisposed.”

Surprisingly, all three women giggled as though they knew exactly what Izzy was talking about.

“I remember,” Marion said, once they had settled. “I remember Helena Brown, do you not, ladies?” They all giggled once again, and for the next hour, the three women recounted stories of the notorious pirate, including the one regarding Helena Brown. Apparently, he had been walking down the streets of Tortuga when he heard an odd noise.

“He stopped,” Marion continued. “And then he heard it again. Thinking that a woman was calling his attention, he slipped off the majority of his clothes and walked into the home only to find that it was not a woman, but a man with a high-pitched voice. Johnny was so startled, he dropped his clothes. And the man, the man thought Johnny wanted something eh...how you say...sexual with him, and of course he got offended. So Johnny ran out of that house with nearly no clothes on across Tortuga until he reached the House.”

All four women burst into laughter upon hearing this, including Izzy. She found that the stories these women were telling were quite amusing, and knowing Johnny, they probably had plenty more as well.

“Where are we, exactly?” Izzy asked, once the women had desisted from laughing.

“Oh my,” Marion said, her face sobering slightly. “Well, *ma cher*, you are in a brothel. My brothel.”

Izzy blinked once, not exactly sure that she had heard the woman correctly. "I'm sorry," she said after a long moment, attempting to take everything, but unable to do so fully. "I think I misheard you. Where did you say we were?"

Marion smiled, her blue eyes lighting up with obvious amusement. "Ehm...this is my brothel," she told Izzy once more, nodding her head once to emphasize the point that she wasn't kidding.

"Oh." Izzy paused, not quite sure how to feel about this new turn of events. She was grateful for a place to stay after her painful incident with those pirates from before, but at the same time... How had Johnny known about this place? Was it one of his frequent stops whenever he came to Tortuga? Had he slept with any of the women before her? Any of the women occupying the rooms? Did he have a favorite? Why would he bring her here? Did he not know of some other place somewhere on this island?

Did the kiss mean anything?

The last question popped into Izzy's head without warning, and she suddenly felt a swirling of pain slide through every nook and cranny of her body. Oddly enough, it had nothing to do with the physical pain, but by something else. Though Izzy wasn't too damaged to know just where and why that feeling came about, she preferred not to think about it at that moment, afraid to admit it even to herself. Instead, she pushed the thought from her mind, not ready to dwell on it quite yet, and tried to keep her face as neutral as it could possibly be.

However, Marion, in her thirty-seven years, was quite perceptive when it came to reading faces. "I see you are troubled," she said, her accent concerned as her blue eyes pooled into Izzy's brown ones.

"No," Izzy immediately denied, shaking her head. "No, it's not that." She paused, hoping she could find some way to explain just how she was feeling without offending any of the three women. "I'm just...surprised." Yes. Perfect word. They couldn't possibly be

offended by that, could they? Izzy decided to elaborate, just in case. "I mean, I'm not exactly sure how long I've been unconscious, you know, and out of all places to wake up in..." She let her voice trail off. "I just never expected that it would be at a brothel."

"Ah," Marion said, nodding as though she understood where Izzy was coming from. "Yes. I understand. But this brothel is probably one of the safest places on this island. No one comes in or goes out without me knowing, and as I'm sure you probably saw upstairs, there are plenty of rooms for privacy. There is a common misconception about women of the night; all of my girls here, I feel, are like my sisters. They will not harm you or offend you in any way."

"Oh, I know," Izzy said, nodding her head a couple of times. "I know. I'm sorry if I've said anything to upset you."

Marion smiled brilliantly, and shook her head. "You haven't," she told the young woman. "Eh, before we continue, I should probably call on the cook to get you some food in order to break your fast. You look absolutely famished, my dear, and there would be a riot on my hands if Johnny found out I was letting you starve." She disappeared out of the kitchen for a moment, before returning shortly with a portly young woman who smiled when she entered, but said nothing more as she started opening cabinets and grabbing different ingredients. Marion's eyes quickly recognized uncertainty in Izzy's, and she had a feeling it had to do with the pirate. "You know," she began, her eyes suddenly serious, "he cares very much for you."

"It seems to be a miracle," Gabriella said, not able to keep a dry tone from her voice. Marion shot her a warning look. "What? It is true! Johnny Clover only cares about himself. That's how it was! When Willow predicted that he would save piracy—"

Izzy blinked once again, unsure of what she just heard. "Um, I'm sorry; excuse me," she mumbled, interrupting Gabriella, who shot her an affronted look. "Did you say Willow—as in a woman—prophesized the fact that Johnny was going to come here and go into war with the Royal Navy?"

"And win," Sarah added, her blue eyes just as serious as Marion's.

"Nobody believed Willow," Marion said, shaking her head as though it was a shame. "Nobody believes her at first, but somehow, all of her predictions have come to pass."

“When she told of Johnny disappearing for a while,” Gabriella began, subconsciously twirling a dark curl around her index finger, “nobody really believed that was significant, only because it is common for him to take off and come back.”

“He has no friends,” Sarah explained, her voice naturally softer than her two companions. “No one that would necessarily miss him. Sure, we did. Many of the women here are enamored with the man, but everyone knew Johnny would never settle down. He was too restless, although—”

“But in the span of two months,” Marion continued, shooting Sarah what Izzy interpreted as a warning look. Though Izzy furrowed her brow at the action, she kept her mouth closed. “There were no sightings of him. Usually, one of us here would hear about an exploit or two, whether he was in Singapore, back in England, the Americas...but nobody saw him for two months.”

“And then four nights ago,” Gabriella cut in, her dark eyes slightly suspicious, “he shows up with you in his arms, claiming that you—”

“Are someone important to him,” Marion quickly interjected, before reaching out and patting Izzy on the back of Izzy’s hand. “He has never left your side, *ma cher*. Although he was offered the room adjacent to yours, he refused, as though he needed to be close to you, to be there when you woke up.”

“He doesn’t care about anybody, really,” Sarah said, and though she was soft-spoken, her blue eyes were blatantly curious. “Except you. Are the two of you—”

Before she could ask her question, Johnny came barging into the kitchen, his dark brown eyes tired with sleep, currently frantic. He opened his mouth, as though to ask Marion a question, when he noticed Izzy glancing back at him over her shoulder. “There you are,” he said, as a sigh of relief slipped out. He all but glared over at Marion as he walked behind Izzy and rested his forearms on the frame of her chair. “You know she shouldn’t be out of bed, Marion. You know she shouldn’t be walking those three flights of stairs.” His eyes captured Izzy’s. “Why are you out of bed? You shouldn’t be out of bed.”

It was hard for Izzy to concentrate on Johnny’s reiteration of his concern because she was distracted by the way he currently looked. His messy hair had fallen into his face, and his chocolate eyes were frantic. He was wearing a tunic that was opened in the front,

exposing a nice portion of torso that was hard for Izzy to look away from. It was thoroughly tan, his chest obviously toned, and a happy trail starting just underneath his bellybutton and slipping underneath his pants. He looked quite handsome, standing there. What had he asked again? He sounded almost worried about something?

“How did you get down here anyways?” Johnny asked, not noticing the way she had clearly checked out his sculpted form.

“I walked,” Izzy told him, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Johnny opened his mouth, not too happy about the tone she had used with him, when Marion cut him off, understanding Johnny’s intentions. “She needed to break her fast, Johnny,” she told the pirate. Marion paused for a moment, before suggesting, “Would you like to take a seat?”

The pirate thought about it for a moment, before nodding a couple of times and pulling out the chair next to Izzy’s, taking a seat. His eyes scanned her profile, causing Izzy to blush at his deep scrutiny.

“I know,” she murmured, turning to look him in the eyes. “I know. I look horrible. Please, don’t make any of your comments.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Johnny said, offended that she would even think he would do such a thing. “I just don’t like you looking like this. I feel as though—”

“It’s not your fault,” Izzy assured him, offering him a tired smile.

Johnny carefully placed his hand in the middle of Izzy’s back, resting his elbow on the frame of her chair. “You really should be in bed, darling,” he told her in a low voice. “What if you accidentally harm yourself some more?”

“You’re a pirate,” Izzy said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “How would you feel if you were restricted to merely a bed?”

Marion, Sarah, and Gabriella watched the exchange with such interest. They had never seen a meaningful conversation exchange between Johnny and...anyone really, especially when the conversation wasn’t solely fixed on him.

Before Johnny could comment, however, the cook turned around, and smiled. “Who’s hungry?” she asked.

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Once breakfast was over, Johnny attempted to persuade Izzy to go back upstairs into their room and get some rest. Actually, persuade was probably an understatement; he insisted quite firmly, even to the point of threatening to pick the young woman up, toss her over his shoulder, and take her there himself. However, Izzy managed to talk Johnny into allowing Marion to take her on a tour of the brothel. When Johnny realized Izzy knew where she was, he winced internally, and begrudgingly agreed, but only if he was allowed to go along.

“Of course,” Izzy had muttered under her breath so that only Johnny could hear. “If anyone knows this place, I would imagine it would be you.”

The tour lasted a good hour or so, only because Marion happened to have plenty of stories featuring the notorious Johnny Clover, as Izzy had suspected. However, they amused the young woman to no end, and though she had originally thought she wouldn’t want to hear them, per se, she was actually enjoying herself. Johnny would add input as well, to clarify things and to straighten out rumors, always insisting that though he might have been known for being a magnificent lover, he had never actually been in love.

Marion watched the two with interested blue eyes, taking in what the two probably couldn’t (or wouldn’t) see. She had realized when Izzy had first come to the dining table that morning that Johnny had not yet told her of his feelings for her. But even to her, it was clearly written in those dark orbs of his. When he looked at her, there seemed to be this unspoken glow about him, this unreadable expression that decorated his chiseled face. In fact, for as long she had known him, Marion had never seen him look at anybody else that way. And though she had yet to hear from this new young woman, it was obvious she felt the same for him.

When they finally reached their room, Marion bid the couple goodbye and promised dinner would be ready by one o’clock that afternoon. She turned, leaving the couple alone.

“So,” Izzy murmured as the two entered the room, Johnny shutting the door behind him, “this is *our* room...?”

“Uh, right,” Johnny said, nodding once, shoving his hands down his pockets and choosing to look out the window rather than at her. Though he had admitted his feelings for Izzy with relative ease to Marion, the thought of confessing them to Izzy herself seemed to unnerve the pirate. “I just...I didn’t feel it was right...I was preparing, if you must know...” However, every time he tried to explain, elaborate, reply, he found he couldn’t find the correct words. He turned from the window, and found his eyes already locked with Izzy’s brown ones. He opened his mouth, trying a fourth time, before shutting it abruptly. She was looking at him, without accusation, but rather curiosity, her lips curled up when she realized this might actually be difficult for him.

“Johnny...?” she asked, but refused to say more, tilting her head to the side and arching a brow.

Without a word, Johnny marched over to her with plain determination. When he reached her, he gently placed his hands over her shoulders and brought his head down so he could look at her closely, levelly. “I was worried,” he told her, his tone serious, his voice low. “I was afraid you wouldn’t wake up. I was afraid you wouldn’t come back to me.”

Izzy looked up at him, and though she didn’t want to be charmed by a man who had told her he couldn’t love anybody, she felt the corners of her lips turn up. “I’m here,” she murmured to him, unable to look away from the depths of his eyes. “I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

“You came back to me,” Johnny said in the same low voice, happiness dripping from each word. To him, saying it only made it that much truer, and he slipped his hands from Izzy’s shoulders so they rested on the curve of her back.

Izzy smiled in return, but before she said anything else, she tilted her head towards him and touched her lips to his. Sure, he might not be able to fall in love with her, but she knew he must care about her in some way—why else would he kiss her back at the bar in Tortuga? Closing her eyes, she kissed him tenderly, a content sigh slipping from her nose. Johnny was taken by such surprise that when he did start to respond to Izzy’s gentle ministrations, she pulled away only to look back into those eyes of his. They looked vulnerable, worried, and almost unsure, as though

Johnny might push her away from him, or would now only petition her for acts in the physical.

Johnny looked down at her, reaching up with one hand and curling an errant strand of hair behind her ear. She looked absolutely priceless in his arms at that moment, despite the bruises, cuts, and marks that littered her body. Instead of removing his fingertip, he trailed it down the hollow of her cheek, down to her jaw line, and then up to her lips where he ran the pad of his thumb over the bottom one. He wanted to kiss her again, but he refrained, if only to capture this moment in his memory and retain such beauty for the rest of his life.

“You kissed me,” he stated, surprised but not displeased. His fingertips on her face was causing fear and pleasure to entwine and overtake her senses at present, but again, she couldn’t force her eyes to look away from him.

“I will always come back to you,” she replied in a soft voice, her lips curling up once again to indicate the sincerity in her words. “You’re all I have.”

“And you, love, are all I want,” Johnny murmured, before placing the pads of his fingers on her jawline once again, only this time, he did it so he could cock her head to the side in a way where it would be easier for him to kiss her.

The pirate dropped his head down, and pressed his lips against hers as his hand crept up from her jaw to cup the side of Izzy’s face in his palm. As she reached up to encircle Johnny’s neck in her arms, Johnny’s grip on the small of her back tightened, and he ran his tongue along her bottom lip, asking her to allow him entrance to her mouth without using unnecessary words. Izzy gladly accepted his request, opening her mouth to him, and granting him full access to her mouth. Johnny didn’t hesitate; his tongue explored everything Izzy had to offer, tasting her, memorizing everything about her. He had never felt anything behind a kiss besides the obvious pleasure before, and at first, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to proceed, but Izzy was too tempting, and his words had been true—he loved her more than he initially realized.

When they had to break apart due to the fact that both had to breathe, Izzy looked up at him. “It is our room, then,” she murmured, before placing her head on Johnny’s chest.

Johnny chuckled, the vibrations against Izzy making her smile, and he pulled her tighter against him. As of now, at that moment,

nothing in the world could deter him from such happiness.

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* * *

Two weeks later, Izzy was feeling better. The bruises and cuts had all but faded, and her energy was back up. She was smiling, joking even, with the occupants of the house. Some still didn't like her. They weren't stupid. They could see the way Johnny looked at her. And when news broke that Johnny was getting ready to leave, they all but cheered.

"I don't want you to come," Johnny told Izzy that night in their room, his voice firm and serious. Izzy opened her mouth, ready to object, when Johnny cut her off. "Don't argue with me, darling. What I'm to do is dangerous, and if anything happened to you while you were under my care, I could never forgive myself."

Izzy thought about this long and hard. "So," she began, knowing what she was going to say but wanted to be careful with how it would come out. "If you left me, I would stay here."

"Correct," Johnny said, nodding a couple of times. A very tiny part of him warned him that Izzy wasn't usually this agreeable when she disagreed with something, but he decided to ignore it.

"In a brothel," she continued, glancing around her room.

"Um. Yes," Johnny said, this time a bit more wary.

"You listen to me, Johnny Clover," Izzy said, narrowing her eyes in his direction. "If you promptly decide to ditch me at a whorehouse, I will have no other choice than to become a working woman myself."

"You wouldn't dare," Johnny said through gritted teeth.

"Wouldn't I?" Izzy asked, arching a brow. "You told me yourself you couldn't possibly fall in love, so this shouldn't bother you in the slightest. So we kissed a few times. I'm sure you've kissed plenty of girls before. And anyways, I'm slightly experienced when it comes to sex, but—"

"You're not becoming a whore," Johnny growled, his eyes nearly black. "Fine, you can come with me, but I'm teaching you how to handle a blade. And you'll listen to me. And you'll—"

Izzy interrupted him, by grabbing his face and kissing him fully on the mouth, temporarily causing Johnny to forget what he was going to say. When they pulled apart, he looked down at her

skeptically.

“You were never going to become a whore, were you?” he asked her, keeping his hands on her hips.

“Nope,” she said, a tiny smile on her lips.

“I really do like kissing you,” Johnny said, feeling slightly bothered that Izzy thought he believed it to be just another kiss. “You’re the only one I want to kiss, you know.”

Izzy smiled, saying nothing in order to allow herself to be wrapped up in his words. It was nice to hear him say that, but she wasn’t quite sure if what he was saying was true. He probably believed it, of course, but who knew if he’d still feel the same way in the future. Love was a scary emotion, but she had a feeling she was already too swept up in Johnny to pick herself up and pretend she felt absolutely nothing for him.

“And you know where kissing leads, hmm?” he asked with a wolfish grin, his dark eyes sparkling.

Izzy rolled her eyes and playfully smacked him on the shoulder. Though, he wasn’t exactly helping himself with those kinds of comments.

"You do know that if you had chosen to dabble in the arts of seduction as a lady of the night, I would have to murder every single one of your customers," Johnny said the next morning over breakfast, looking at Izzy over a bowl of arguably the best porridge in the Caribbean. The two were quite comfortable with each other, and they managed to share a room—a bed—without any incident as of yet. Neither had confessed any sort of emotional ties concerning their feelings for each other, though both expressed desire in kissing and some chaste caressing when it came to their opposite. It was obvious to anyone and everyone who encountered them, even for a mere moment, how they truly felt, but said nothing regarding such thoughts, deciding to leave it to the two involved.

"Murder?" Izzy asked arching a brow after swallowing a raisin-filled bite of the hot meal. She pushed her lips into a frown as she regarded Johnny pointedly. "Is it so easy for you to kill somebody?" Her tone was not judgmental, but rather inquisitive, and Johnny could clearly read the curiosity in her eyes.

"It depends," Johnny said, taking a moment to take in his surroundings. It was just the two of them currently in the dining room. That morning, both of them had risen into the early afternoon after a night of deep slumber. Marion apparently expected this because she had two bowls of porridge saved for the company. "If I am defending myself and feel threatened in a fatal way, then I could kill. If I was defending somebody I truly care about, my intentions might be persuaded much easier only because I find that I am protective over what and whom I treasure."

"I thought you don't really have people you care about," she stated. Again, she was merely stating a fact, with no intention of coming off as closed-minded concerning his own personal belief system.

"I have a very select few," Johnny told her, throwing a disarming smile in Izzy's direction. "And you, my love, are at the very top of the list."

Izzy couldn't keep the tender smile off of her face if she had

tried, but she averted her eyes so they looked down at the porridge in the bowl. Johnny seemed to know how he affected her, for he smiled at her reaction—at the smile itself, and the pink blush currently littering her cheeks. He absolutely adored making her blush; Izzy was quite becoming when she was embarrassed about something.

“You would only murder them because you think I’m yours,” Izzy said, refraining from rolling her eyes, but forcing them to lock with Johnny’s dark ones. “You’re like a dog, you know. I’m actually surprised you haven’t peed on me yet.”

Johnny frowned at such a notion, and he reached over to cup Izzy’s hand, the rough tip of his thumb already caressing mindless patterns on the surface of her skin. As usual, goose bumps sprang to attention all over Izzy’s body, and she couldn’t continue to ignore the way her heart skipped every time he did something so simple and out of character. Her mere infatuation for him was blossoming into something more; she couldn’t deny it anymore.

“You are mine.” The words that trailed out of Johnny’s mouth and laced in his usual low tone were spoken as though it was the most obvious thing in the entire world. However, he said no more on the matter, and refused to do so only because he wanted to avoid having a discussion on the subject of labeling what they had when it concerned their relationship. He didn’t want to commit to anything as of yet, afraid that something may happen to her, especially since she all but forced herself to accompany him on what everyone called his destiny. Upon hearing his words, Izzy opened her mouth as though to argue, maybe even question his statement, and Johnny recognized the look, clearing his throat and starting a new subject. “So, do you think you’ll miss it?”

Izzy paused, deciding that she was finished with breakfast and glanced over at her partner. The question did its job; it threw her off, at least for now. “Miss what?” she asked him, quirked a brow.

“Your home,” he elaborated, his sharp eyes taking in every inflection Izzy’s face had to offer in hopes to decipher any hidden meanings that might or might not reside there. “I mean, darling, when I was in your world, I really didn’t miss mine, only because there was nothing here to miss. But I know that you may be more inclined to miss your home because you had your family, you had Bex, you had Brian, your job.”

“Oh,” Izzy murmured, suddenly feeling guilty at the notion. She

hadn't really thought about it, but then again, she really didn't have the time to do so. It was in Tortuga when she had been badly damaged, and she was in and out of consciousness for the next few days before realizing what had happened. Then the next two weeks flew by only because Marion, Gabriella, and Sarah all amused her with stories featuring Johnny in some way. And Johnny himself was as much of a distraction as anyone. "I'm not sure," she finally said, running her fingers through her hair. "Of course I'll miss Bex, and even my family from time to time, but I graduated college, and that was one of my goals."

Johnny's your home now, a silky, almost romantic voice teased, causing Izzy to clear her throat a couple of times.

"I guess I'm just not used to being here," she finished, looking into her bowl of porridge in hopes to avoid Johnny's scrutinizing gaze. "Maybe I will. I"—she paused, blushing, before forcing her eyes to meet his— "I probably would miss everything more if you weren't with me."

This statement seemed to genuinely please Johnny, and he smiled quite brilliantly, so much so that Izzy felt a substantial portion of her breath disappear of its own accord.

"Well, darling," he began, standing up with his bowl in his hand. He reached over and grabbed Izzy's before placing them on the sink counter next to the other bowls that were waiting to be cleaned. "We have to leave soon. The crew should be at the ship in mere hours. Have you gotten everything you need?"

Izzy shook her head, following Johnny's suit, and standing. "No," she murmured, placing her fingertip on the point of her chin. "I should probably start packing."

* * *

Izzy was nearly finished with the task at hand an hour later when a knock at the door caused any thoughts she may have been dwelling on to disappear. Believing it to be Johnny, she called for the knocker to come in, keeping her focus on finishing what she had set out to do. Surprisingly, however, it was not Johnny who was at the door, but Marion.

"Oh, Marion," Izzy said when she realized who her guest was. She pushed up to a standing position, feeling the burn of her

muscles due to the length of time she had been kneeling. "Are you all right? How can I help you?"

Marion smiled the usual beguiling smile, and for the umpteenth time, Izzy wondered why Johnny wasn't in some sort of relationship with the Madame. She was stunning and sweet, and had quite a profit to her name. Though the jealousy in Izzy wanted to hate her, the feat was impossible because of the natural warmth Marion had.

"I am fine, Izzy," she said, the name still sounding slightly funny when it touched her French accent. "Actually, I wanted to give something to you." When she raised her arms, Izzy noticed that something was in them. "It is a dress. It is one of my favorites. I hope that by taking this, you will remember me."

"I don't need anything to remember you by, really," Izzy said sincerely, her eyes pooling into Marion's. "You don't have to do this."

"Please, allow me to do so," Marion insisted, so Izzy reached out and took the material into her arms. "I think that Johnny will like it on you; the dress will bring out your eyes." Izzy glanced down upon hearing Johnny's name and looked at the sea-green material, wondering when she was going to ever wear it, but promising herself she would—sooner or later.

"Thank you," Izzy murmured, placing it gently on the surface of her bed. Her eyes looked up and locked into the older woman's. "For everything, I mean. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Johnny and I are friends," Marion told the young woman. "At least, I consider him to be so. There are people, both pirate and Navy, who dislike him because of what he is supposed to do. I believe that with you accompanying him, he will stay grounded, more so than normal. I know you care for him, Isabelle. I can see it so clearly in your eyes. And I know that you will look out for him to the best of your abilities. It worries me, this whole prophecy, this impending war. Nobody is sure if Johnny will survive it. But with you, his chances are surely better."

"I would do anything for him," Izzy said, speaking before her mind could catch up. Though when she finished her sentence, she knew her words were true.

Marion seemed to know it too, for she nodded and said, "I know." She smiled as she looked into Izzy's eyes, nodding once. "And that is payment enough."

Johnny, Izzy, and the rest of the crew occupied the ship a couple of hours later. After saying goodbye to Marion, Sarah, Gabriella, and everyone else, the ship sailed out of the secluded dock and into the sea. Originally, Johnny was at the helm and Izzy was at the bow, leaning over the railing in order to look at the ship sail across the crystal Caribbean water. Johnny watched her for a long moment, taking in everything about her. He was awed by the fact that no matter how long he stared at her, he always found something else he was fascinated with. It was as though this woman was a magician, and somehow, he was cast in her spell. Oddly enough, he didn't find any reason to complain.

After a couple of hours on the sea, Johnny decided to teach Izzy how to handle a blade. "Beautiful day out," he said, glancing over at Izzy. She turned to look at him, and then cast her eyes upwards in order to look at the sky. After a moment, she returned his smile, and nodded in agreement. "I have an idea, darling. Taking into account what happened in Tortuga, I have come to the conclusion that you have no idea about the multiple tricky situations you could very possibly get into, and most likely *will* get into, so I am here to offer my services free of charge."

Izzy raised her eyebrow as she crossed her arms over her chest. "What kind of services?" she asked, watching the pirate captain like a hawk watching its prey.

"I'm glad you asked that, darling," Johnny replied, raising his index fingers "for I was just about to show you." The pirate captain spun around on the worn heel of his boot, and walked over to vacant area of his ship. He turned once again, a mischievous smile on his face. Then, all of a sudden, he whipped out his sharp cutlass, and began to parry the air surrounding him, a determined look upon his face. Once his dance was done, he stood straight, looking at the woman before him, and then took a dramatic bow. When he rose, he eyed Izzy a bit more closely. He raised an eyebrow in slight surprise. Her hand was over her delicate mouth, and her eyes were

cast towards the sea, as if she were purposefully avoiding all and any eye contact with him. It was then that he realized that she was laughing at his performance.

Johnny walked over to her slowly, his eyes flashing with annoyance, and even some offense, but as he stepped closer, in hopes to intimidate her, her face got more and more distorted so she wouldn't laugh out loud. He stopped when he was half a foot away from her, and leaned down so his nose would be brushing hers if it wasn't for her hand covering her mouth. Her face turned bright red, and her eyes lit up so strikingly that it caught Johnny off guard, but only for a quick moment. "Is something funny to you, missy?" he asked.

Finally, her eyes met his, and she shook her head, but her answer was in vain. She lost control over her laughter, and burst into a fit of giggles. It was so contagious that Johnny had to press his lips together to ensure that he wouldn't laugh. Instead, he just stood there, his head tilted to the side, a fraction of a degree, trying to understand this young woman's response to his display of talent.

Izzy managed to compose herself, but an amused smile still rested on her lips.

"Are you finished, then?" Johnny asked with annoyance.

Izzy nodded. "I do have a question, though," she said, raising her hand to emphasize her point.

"And, pray tell, what would that be?" Johnny asked, trying to maintain his patience.

"Why were you doing that?" Izzy questioned, flailing her arms about in a manner of mimicking the man before her. "What is that, exactly? I already know how to dance." Johnny turned to glance back at the young woman, a look of frustration on his face. "All right, sorry. I'll be serious now." She bit her lip, but failed to keep a smile off of her face.

At that moment, Johnny slipped off his tunic so his bronze chest was bare and grabbed onto the cutlass that had been hanging from his side. Izzy's breath caught in her throat as she stopped abruptly. Her eyes couldn't help but drink in the scenery before her; his brazen torso, his toned muscles, his built shoulders, the scars that decorated his body as ornaments decorate a Christmas tree. A feeling of arousal overtook her senses, and even though she tried desperately, she couldn't take her eyes off of him. He was beautiful.

"See something you like, darling?"

His voice clipped into her senses, causing her eyes to drift back up to his face. Her face felt like fire, and when she opened her mouth to reply a witty retort, she could muster no sound. She felt like such a fool, being speechless because this man couldn't dress properly. "Are you going to get decent?" she managed to say, after finding control of her voice.

His smirk deepened. "I don't intend to, no," Johnny said, knowing full well the effect he was having on her. He loved being admired by women, especially beautiful women, women that he, too, admired in a strictly physical way. Izzy was the epitome of what he found attractive; beautiful eyes, a curvy body.

"Are you ready?" Johnny asked, forcing himself to speak. "Now, darling, pretend I'm coming at you, about to tackle you to the ground," he began, standing in front of her. "Let's say that instead of running, you decide to actually stay and fight."

"Okay," Izzy murmured, her eyes locking with Johnny's.

"Get into a stance in a manner to defend yourself," he told her, and Izzy did as she was told, her right foot in front of her left, her right shoulder hunched over as though she was defending herself. "Ah," he said smiling. "We have a leftie on our hands. All right, that's good, but you need to make your stance strong," he told, and then to prove his point, he pushed her. She lost her footing quite easily, but managed to catch herself without his aid.

"Here," Johnny said, getting into his own defensive stance. "Why don't you push me?"

A smirk appeared on Izzy's face, and she immediately pushed him, throwing her weight into it. It was all in vain, however, for he moved, maybe, about an inch, but his footing was steady. He chuckled with amusement. "Nice try, pet," he said. "Now you try."

Izzy locked her jaw and nodded, showing she was ready. Her muscles were tense, but Johnny still managed to get her to lose her footing. She groaned, frustrated, only causing Johnny to laugh again. They repeated this procedure a few more times before Johnny was finally satisfied with her stance, though he must admit how much he thoroughly enjoyed touching her.

When they finished, Johnny pulled out his cutlass, and moved so that he was standing shoulder to shoulder with her, his weapon horizontal. "Take it in your hands," he gently commanded, and Izzy wrapped her left hand around the hilt of the sword, while her right hand remained flat, her palm underneath the cool blade. She stared

at it with wonder; she had never before held a weapon in her hands, and while it intimidated her, she was awestruck at the power she was now feeling. She felt in control of herself.

"This is the hilt," he told her quietly, placing his hand on hers. The intense energy between them seemed to have come back to surround them; they shared a passion for the weapon in her hands. His had been around the day he had first picked up a cutlass, and hers seemed to have resulted the same way his did. "And this is the blade. These are the two parts that make up a cutlass."

"What is the difference between the cutlass and the sword?" Izzy asked, craning her neck to look up at him from behind her.

"A marvelous question, my dear," he replied. "The blade of a cutlass is shorter, blunter...easier to fight with. Swords have longer blades, which could very easily get tangled in riggings and whatnot. Swords also feel more awkward, and are not necessarily as damaging as cutlasses."

"Teach me," Izzy breathed. Her eyes looked up to him. "I want to learn."

"Good," was Johnny's curt reply. A funny feeling pitted against his stomach, looking into her eyes and seeing desire, passion.

Johnny taught her, and when he stopped for a break every now and then, she would practice until he arrived to resume his lesson. She yearned to learn more, and when he complied with her request, she learned quickly. It was so intriguing for him to watch her because the moves that he taught her were aggressive, and to see her put her feminine grace to it was beautiful.

When the sun was near the horizon, Johnny stopped, his toned chest drenched with sweat. He studied Izzy for a long moment and found her face was smooth and clear. While there were beads of sweat on her forehead, she did not look like she had just spent hours practicing everything he taught her. He thought it to himself a lot, but she was beautiful.

"You're well onto being a pirate," he told her, taking her hands in his in order to remove the cutlass.

Izzy smiled, and nodded a couple of times. "That would be unexpected, hmm?" she asked him, raising a brow as she looked at him.

"That it would," Johnny agreed.

"You should put on a tunic," Izzy murmured, casting her eyes down at his bare chest, changing the subject. "You look cold." She

smirked as she sauntered away, deciding to change into a new set of clothes.

Johnny looked down at his chest, noticing that, indeed, goose bumps had erupted onto his chest, and his nipples had become erect. Shaking his head, the pirate captain followed Izzy over to his room to find a clean tunic to wear.

Izzy's hands were placed on the surface of the banister portside of the ship, her shoulders pushed up as her eyes scanned the sea. It was probably the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. The golden rays of the sun bled into the horizon of the sea, meshing with the bluest water, causing strings of blue, pink, orange, and even some purple to stain the sky. The young woman had never seen anything quite like it. She thought she was lucky for being able to watch the sunset every day at the beach, but this... This was completely different. She had always wanted to experience a true Caribbean sunset, especially on the sea, but she never expected it to be so...perfect.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a voice mumbled from beside her. Izzy glanced to her right and found Johnny standing next to her, peering out at the horizon, just as she had been doing.

Instead of saying anything in return, Izzy merely nodded and turned her attention back to the sunset. "You're so lucky," she murmured, watching as the sun slowly started to slide behind the body of water. "You get to see these every day."

"You realize you do too, right?" Johnny asked, glancing down at the woman next to him. For whatever reason, Johnny moved his left arm so it rested next to Izzy's left hand while Johnny's right hand rested next to Izzy's right one, so the young woman was trapped between his strong arms and her back was caressing his chest. "I mean," he said, tilting his head down so he could all but whisper in her ear, "you are here...now...with me." Izzy did her best to ignore the sensation his hot breath caused when it touched her skin, but the way his voice sounded, low and husky, was making the task harder than she had originally thought it would be.

"Can I ask you something?" Izzy asked, releasing the banister once the sun had fully set and turned around so she could look Johnny in the eyes. She just wasn't expecting him to be so close, his lips mere centimeters from hers, the corners curled up in that cocky grin he was famous for.

"Anything," he said in the same tone, his dark eyes focused

primarily on her lips. Goodness, he wanted to kiss her. How long had it been since he had last been familiar with her lips?

“What is this war you’re destined to lead other pirates into?” she asked him, her voice soft. A touch of worry laced through her words, and her brow was pushed together to indicate that she was indeed worried for him.

Johnny had to pause his response, in hopes to memorize every inch of her face at this precise moment in time. He had never seen somebody so worried about him. This, of course, was his fault if anything due to the conscious choice of forgoing friendships, but seeing it so clearly in her brown eyes caused something warm in him to spread throughout her body. He, of course, had already admitted that he loved her, even aloud, even to somebody else, but was it possible to love her more than he already did? She didn’t even know that he cared for her, and yet she was still worried about him.

“It’s a war,” Johnny replied, trying to think of a way to respond to her question. “And I am destined to lead pirates to it.” He winced slightly, knowing that wasn’t exactly the answer Izzy was looking for, but he realized just how hard it was to explain. “It’s a long time coming, darling. I really don’t know exactly what to say or how to explain it. But it’s something I’ve known my entire life.”

“But why you?” Izzy asked, cocking her head to the side very slightly. “Why not some other pirate? Is this karma from some past life?”

“Love, to be completely honest, I have no idea,” Johnny replied. “All I know is that it’s me, which is why I chose to run away.”

“If you know you’re supposed to lead this group of people,” Izzy began slowly, her eyes scanning Johnny’s in hopes for some kind of answer, “Do you know the result? Do you know if your side wins or loses? Do you know if you...?” She let her voice trail off, unable to finish her thought before biting her bottom lip. “Is that why you choose not to have any friends or anyone close to you? You’re not sure if you...survive?” Izzy wasn’t sure if the whole line of questioning would offend Johnny or not, so her voice was light and wary.

Johnny opened his mouth, ready to refuse her query before pausing. Was that why he didn’t have any friends? Why he chose not to depend on anyone because he knew that if he were to die, it wouldn’t matter. “In all probability,” Johnny began, “yes. I do not

know the outcome of this particular war.” He pushed his brows together, an idea suddenly popping into his head as he gazed down at Izzy. “But you, my love, you are from the future. You must know the outcome. What is it?”

“I didn’t even know there was a war between pirates and the Royal Navy,” Izzy told him, uncomfortable at the fact that she should know this, but oddly enough, never learned of it. “I mean, I guess if Jack Sparrow was based on you, and if *Pirates of the Caribbean* was based on your encounters and your life, then there is a war in the third movie. But you don’t lead the war. Elizabeth gets voted Pirate King, by Jack’s vote. And she leads everybody in war.”

Johnny looked at Izzy in disbelief. “Elizabeth?” he asked her. “You mean that girl who gets kidnapped? How could she possibly be a Pirate King (which, there is no such thing, by the way) in a span of two movies? How could *she* lead pirates to war?”

“Well, the pirates don’t want to go to war, to be honest,” Izzy explained. “But it’s Elizabeth who manages to talk everyone into going to war.”

“But it’s Jack’s vote that allows her to order it, is it not?” Johnny asked.

“Yes, but the only reason he wants to go to war is because he’s up to no good,” Izzy said, rolling her eyes before quickly adding, “As usual.”

“Ah, but he looks so good pillaging, plundering, and the like, hmm, love?” Johnny teased, perking his brow slightly.

“Johnny Depp does, yes,” Izzy said, amusement twinkling quite clearly in her eyes. Before she realized it, Johnny’s hands slipped off the banister and grabbed a hold of Izzy’s waist, gently pinching her as she let out a contagious set of giggles. “Hey!” she managed to exclaim as his fingers continued to tease her skin. “Not fair!”

Johnny stopped for a quick moment, casting his eyes up at the dark sky. “Oh, what was the line?” he asked to himself before he returned his eyes to Izzy. “That’s right. *Pirate*.”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Oh, ha ha,” she said dryly, but found that Johnny had stopped, save for his long index fingers. They were currently under the hemline of her shirt, tracing mindless patterns on either side of her. An odd sort of look occupied Johnny’s dark eyes, and he stared down at the young woman for a long moment. Izzy’s breath hitched in her throat. Was he going to kiss her? Did she want him to kiss her?

Yes. Yes she did.

"You are my friend," Johnny told her suddenly, seriously.

Izzy wasn't sure whether she should be happy or upset. On the one hand, he could mean he didn't see her as more than a friend, or at least, a friend to have fun with. On the other hand, he never really had a friend before, had he? And the fact that he considered her as such was no doubt a grand compliment.

"A very *close* friend," he added, coiling his arms around Izzy's waist as the familiar sparkle suddenly reoccupied his eyes.

Izzy once again rolled her eyes, and struggled out of Johnny's grip, afraid that if she didn't, she may not exactly ask him to stop. She had so recently yearned for him to kiss her, and knew that if kissing soon became not enough, it would lead to more intimate activities that she probably wouldn't say no to. As such, she had to stop it before it began.

"If your refusal is because you wish to remain admirable, I can perform our marriage right now on this ship," Johnny said, longing to have her in his arms once again, but staying still in hopes to gauge her reaction.

"Yeah, right," Izzy said. "You. Married? After all you had to say about how much you didn't believe in love?"

"I find that marriage sometimes has nothing to do with love," Johnny pointed out, refusing to acknowledge his feelings for her as of yet.

"Maybe for you," Izzy told him. "But when I—if I—get married, I want to be in love. And since you believe that love doesn't exist, I"—her voice hitched in her throat, which surprised her because what she was saying was true. Izzy just didn't realize how much it hurt to admit it. "I won't be marrying you. Now," she added quickly, unable to look him in the eyes. "I should probably get to bed. I'm a bit tired...." With that, she managed to weasel around him and head back into her room.

Johnny watched her go, a frown on his face. He knew that what she said was his fault, but her words had troubled him more than he was willing to admit.

Don't kiss him....

You know you want to though....

That's beside the point! The point is, Isabelle, you know how badly if such a thing were to ever occur, you would be screwed.

Literally! And what a way to go, hmm?

There is no way you should entangle yourself with somebody who doesn't even believe in the concept of love or the notion of committing to a monogamous relationship. It's a waste of time and tears, and practically suicide.

So we're admitting that we might have considerably fragile feelings for a certain pirate?

It would seem that way, yes. And now that we have that out of the way, we can focus on the biggest problem yet. His manners of seduction, because, let's face it, he's been trying to get us to bed with fierce determination the last few days.

I actually find no problem with this current predicament.

Which is why I'm the willpower and you are the sexually frustrated romantic.

Oh. Like it's my fault Zach wasn't the best in bed and just standing next to that damn pirate causes all senses to go into overdrive with desire because we both know how amazing a night in the sack with the notorious Johnny Clover would be.

I remember that dream, thank you very much. But this is beside the point, once again. Isabelle doesn't want to get hurt, and if she gets hurt, then so do we. Face it; Johnny is irresistible because he doesn't want to be tied down, and the romantic in her wants to do just that.

Yes.

But it's illogical! Bad things are bound to happen. If anyone gets hurt, it'll be Izzy, and to be honest, the pain is excruciating.

You know what logic's problem is?

This will be great....

You're afraid. You're afraid to get hurt. Yeah, it's smart, but it's also sad. Sure, in all likelihood, Johnny may not return Izzy's feelings of something more than heated infatuation, but

what if he does? And what if we don't take that chance? Sure, logic is logic because the first thing it does is protect itself. But you can't protect yourself from love. What Izzy—what *we*—need to figure out is if Johnny Clover is worth the fear and the pain we're likely to experience.

...

...

Even if what you're saying is true, and we decide to pursue something, we can't, in good conscience, do it now. Johnny has a war to be a part of, a group of people to save, and so forth. We can't distract him, and we can't make him feel guilty for feelings he can't force, nor could we distract him with a night of sex, no matter how hot it's going to be.

Then what do you suggest we do, if you're so smart.

We wait.... And when—if—the opportune moment presents itself, we go with our gut instinct. Our heart.

You know, what makes up the heart is you and me agreeing on something, no matter how crazy it seems. Do you think that'll happen, that we'll agree?

I think we already have.

Thoughts like these were the reason Izzy couldn't get to sleep some of the nights, and when she did, her slumber wasn't incredibly fulfilling. It didn't help that the man who constantly raided her thoughts with his haunting face was sleeping beside her, usually with an arm strewn around her waist. But at least, slowly but surely, she was working through her troubles....

* * *

"Land ho, capt'n!" a crew member exclaimed from the crow's nest.

Izzy's head had snapped from the menial task Johnny had assigned her to do—swab the deck—and she all but rushed to starboard to get a better look at where they would be docking soon. A small frown tugged down the corners of her lips as she took in the sight. Though there were numerous ships and whatnot scattered closer to the island, the island itself was rather small. If the navy was to ever find this place—this secret location only pirates knew, as Johnny had told her—then they were done for.

Johnny swaggered right up to where Izzy was standing so his

shoulder casually brushed hers. He, too, looked at the island, with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. When he glanced down to study to the woman next to him, he immediately noticed the somewhat disappointed frown.

"You underestimate it," he told her. It wasn't a question, and she knew he knew her too well to argue. "There's nothing to worry about, darling," he said, patting her shoulder a couple of times. "You'll be safe."

"I'm not worried about me," Izzy told him, though she refused to meet his eyes with her own. She had always been told that her eyes gave away more than she expected, than she wanted other people to know about herself, and she hoped that by avoiding contact with Johnny, he wouldn't recognize just how worried she was for him.

After the evening where he told her about what was expected of him—his role—in this war, she couldn't stop thinking about what might happen to him. Either he would lead the pirates to their victory, a triumphant and successful leader, or he would die a hero, sacrificing himself for something he strongly believed in.

Though if Izzy was being honest, she wasn't exactly sure he believed in it. Piracy, sure. The right to piracy, of course. But Izzy was certain that Johnny didn't exactly see himself as a leader, and was uncomfortable with the whole notion of going into battle with men blindly following him.

Johnny glanced down at Izzy, taking in her profile for a moment before saying softly, "Well, love, are you ready?"

* * *

When Johnny and Izzy stepped on the docks, a short, thin-framed man approached them. He told them his name was Pimms, and he was from the English pirate captain Watson's ship. He was to lead them to the awaiting brigade. When they approached a thinly veiled door, Pimms knocked three distinct times before a portion of the upper half of the door slid opened and asked for a password. Izzy watched this with absolute awe. She thought things like this only happened in the movie, and yet it was happening right in front of her.

The door swung opened, and everyone was quickly escorted inside. Though many of the pirates currently lounging around in

what Izzy thought resembled an eighteenth century lobby took notice of their leader, Johnny's presence didn't stop them from continuing their conversation. Izzy was reminded of the Brethren Court from the third *Pirates* movie, except with many more people in a bigger room. The pirates took notice of her as well. Some leered at her, not expecting to see a woman in their fortress (although there were a few female pirates scattered about), while others were simply curious that one of the most notorious bachelors had a woman as some sort of acquaintance. In fact, one pirate actually commented on the matter.

"Some wench finally tied ye down, eh, Clover?" Charles O'Malley, known for his carrot-red hair and beard as well as being the representative for Ireland, said, upon noticing the close proximity between Johnny and Izzy.

"I am not some wench," Izzy said, completely affronted at the derogatory term and glanced over at the man who was smiling jovially.

Johnny smirked, wrapping his arm around Izzy's waist, pausing only for a moment. "I keep proposing, but she's keen on turning me down," he explained, and grinned charmingly down at the woman in his arms.

This statement caught the ear of the surrounding pirates. So this woman actually meant something to Johnny? It was obviously not any sort of family relation, and by the way she walked and spoke, they assumed she wasn't of the prostitute persuasion. So just who was this woman and how could she have possibly affected Johnny to the point where he would *continuously* propose marriage? Was he daft? Many believed so. Was he under some sort of a spell? Maybe.

"That's a firs'!" the Irishmen exclaimed, causing the pirates within earshot to start chortling with laughter.

"I intend to wear her down, though," Johnny said, though nobody could hear him except for said woman.

"Maybe if you asked me for the right reasons, I might be more willing to consider it," Izzy snapped before wiggling herself free from his grasp. Luckily, another pirate, this one from Spain, distracted Johnny, leaving Izzy alone with her thoughts.

That was a close one....

You know what I don't get? Why would a pirate, so intent on maintaining his freedom, who doesn't believe in love, won't even consider going steady with someone... Why would he

continue to ask Izzy to marry him?

Even I can't say. Maybe he really does have... But no. Let's not get our hopes up. The best advice I could say upon the matter is to be careful, be wary, and not succumb to temptation no matter how desirous it might be. The reasons he continues to propose can't be honorable, unless his feelings really are true but have yet to be admitted.

In all likelihood, it is doubtful, and thus, our defenses should be raised.

"Gentlemen!" Johnny called, hoping that his voice was strong enough to catch the attention of the men currently occupying the room. Izzy glanced up sharply at Johnny, giving him a pointed look. Just because the room was primarily filled with men did not mean that he could completely dismiss a whole other gender. Johnny caught Izzy's look and smiled sheepishly before correcting the matter. "And ladies, of course." Izzy smiled, pleased that he amended for his mistake, and took a couple of steps back so she could watch him.

"Yes," he continued, trying to find the words to say that would be taken seriously among these groups of men *and* women. "Well, I'm sure you are all aware why I am here."

"Surprised is more like it," a voice called. Though Johnny craned his neck in the direction of the voice, he couldn't make out who said it, although many of the surrounding pirates murmured in agreement.

"I...", he began, thinking of some excuse to use, but after a long moment, ultimately decided against it. "You're right. You're absolutely right." This seemed to throw the pirates off, but Izzy smiled proudly, her eyes lighting up as she watched him. When Johnny was honest in his manner of speaking, nobody could match him. "Even I am surprised to be standing here in front of you."

"Where were you these past couple o' months?" another one questioned. "Y'know the war was to 'ave started sooner than now."

"Yes, yes I know," Johnny agreed, nodding a couple of times, his index finger caressing the tip of his chin. "I couldn't exactly tell you where I was because you wouldn't believe me even if I told you. But, what's important is that I'm here now. I'm here to do this."

"Yeah, well not many are happy abou' tha'," another pirate said, though this time, he stepped forward. Izzy saw that he was big, a couple of inches taller than Johnny. And if need be, she was sure he could be quite intimidating. "How do we know ye aren't goin' to just leave us again?"

"Trust is a tricky issue with me," Johnny admitted, staring the

man in the eyes. "To be honest, I was perfectly content not trusting anybody and having them not trust me. I cannot win you with words, I know, so I'm not going to try. But I do hope that my presence here is helping the matter, however slight it might be." He was silent for a moment, his dark eyes scanning the faces of his audience. "I can guarantee you, however, that I am willing to lead us into battle against the Navy. I cannot promise you success, but I can promise you that we can damn well try. The sea is ours, and I'll be damned if some Royal Navy man is going to take it away from *me*." He stopped here, and Izzy noticed how his eyes were nearly black with seriousness. She had never seen Johnny like this before, and was certain that if no one knew Johnny, they would probably be afraid. She, however, found it oddly arousing. "I know that some may not support me, and if this is so, please leave and leave now. We are all going to battle, and some of us—most of us—may not come out alive. However, if you choose to stay, then I would be honored to lead you. Those of you who are representatives, please come aboard my ship. The rest of you can enjoy your stay here."

With that, Johnny spun on his heel and started to walk out of the fortress. Izzy wasn't sure whether or not she should follow, so she stayed put. When Johnny realized Izzy wasn't with him, he glanced over his shoulder and nodded, indicating that he was waiting for her. Once she caught up, the two walked out together.

* * *

"So," Izzy said, tilting her head so she could catch Johnny's profile with her eyes. They had just boarded the deserted ship. "What, exactly, are you going to do now?" Her voice wasn't judgmental or accusatory. Merely, she was curious, if anything, and wanted to know (without yet asking) if there was anything she could do to help.

"Well, that depends if the representatives decide to follow me or not," Johnny said, and though he didn't look stressed, Izzy could detect an edge to his usual laidback voice. He glanced over at her and realized she probably had no idea what he was talking about. "Representatives, darling, are those who are in charge of their region, country, and the like. They make the decisions for their particular area."

“How does one become a representative?” Izzy asked, realizing Johnny was leading her to the galleys.

“One inherits the position,” Johnny told her, “though lineage isn’t necessary. The previous representative can choose his—or her—replacement before...retiring, I suppose you would say.”

So it much resembled *At World’s End* then. Or was it the other way around?

“Well,” Izzy said once they had entered the large room. “I’m sure they will follow you. You’re supposed to be their leader, right? Did you inherit the position?”

Johnny shook his head and took a seat at the head of the table. “No,” he said, and as he continued to speak, Izzy detected slight bitterness in his tone. “No, I wasn’t born into my position, love. I was chosen, as you might say. Though, ironically enough, I had no choice in the matter.”

“Well, surely you were chosen for a reason Johnny,” Izzy said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You know that, don’t you? Everything happens for a reason. And I’m sure that the reason that you were chosen out of everybody else was because nobody could do what you’re capable of doing. You know, for someone who has a hard time with trusting others, it surprises me you have trouble trusting yourself.”

“I don’t discriminate,” Johnny said with a tired smile, though he felt his insides elated by her encouraging words.

“If it makes a difference,” Izzy said, looking at the table as she finally took a seat next to him, “I trust in you.”

Johnny’s lips twitched up, this time of their own accord, and he reached over and placed his hand over hers. “It makes all the difference,” he murmured.

Before the two could talk anymore on the subject, the galley door opened and thirteen, fourteen, about seventeen pirates—all men—came in. Some seemed wary about trusting the elusive pirate Clover, others were determined to go to battle no matter who was leading, while others were simply curious. They all took their places at the long table and looked at Johnny, waiting for him to begin. It seemed as though they didn’t even notice Izzy’s presence, or if they did, they ignored it. All that was on their minds was battle, pure and simple. And if Johnny could lead them into it, then they would certainly hear what he had to say.

“Well, Clover?” an Englishman barked, narrowing his dark blue

eyes in Johnny's direction. "What say you? What be your plan?"

"Well gentlemen," Johnny said, throwing an easy smile onto his face. "I must be honest; I am quite surprised that you showed up. That *all* of you showed up, I should say."

"Yes, well so are we," the representative from Japan said before snapping a piece of the gum he was chewing.

"Enough chitchat," the pirate in charge of Africa demanded, slamming his fist on the table, startling Izzy slightly. "What is your plan, Clover? You were already late showin' up here which means the Navy is close by. We only have little time before sailing for battle, and this is our first time convening."

"I see your point," Johnny said, keeping his voice calm and his cool eyes focused on the man who addressed him. "But I do have an ace up my sleeve, as it were." He shifted his eyes so they were now focused on the group before him as a whole. "As is customary for pirates, I say we call a parley and have an old chat with Lord Shield and a couple of his men. See if we can't work things out with words."

"Can't work things out wit' words!" the Irishman exclaimed as though Johnny was dense for even suggesting something as pointless as that.

"Yes, well we should try," Johnny said firmly, "unless you are willing to lead your men into a battle—to *their deaths*—a battle that may have been worked through with words, we parley and discuss terms and agreements."

"And if agreement is impossible?" the representative of America asked, meeting Johnny's cool eyes with his own.

Johnny sighed through his nose, as though he knew that fighting would be necessary, despite any attempts otherwise. "If an agreement cannot be reached," Johnny said slowly, taking care to articulate each and every word, "then we have no choice but to go war. And that's my final decision."

"I want to go with you," Izzy stated firmly, placing her hands on a jutted hip.

Johnny looked at her with a decidedly determined frown, his eyes trailing over her face. How he had gotten used to such a face in these past few months. Take, for instance, those brown eyes that were pointedly narrowed in his direction. Beautiful eyes, of course, but they appeared as sharpened spears as they looked at him. And her brow was furrowed so low that it nearly rested over those beautiful eyes, with a vertical wrinkle indenting just above her nose. And that mouth—those lips—that he adored kissing and wanted nothing more than to claim them once again as his own were pressed into a prominently thin line.

"That is absolutely out of the question," he told her flatly, looking at her with a dark, lazy gaze. If it was possible, her brow got even lower upon hearing his answer. "You cannot threaten to become a whore now, and you cannot run away."

"I'm creative," Izzy mumbled, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked away, not even bothering to stop the pout from touching her features. "I'll think of something."

"I'm sure you will," Johnny agreed, nodding a couple of times as he placed his palm on the surface of his desk. They were currently in his quarters once the meeting had dispersed, Izzy claiming she had wanted to talk to him before the parley. "But my answer's still going to be no."

"You are so closed-minded, you know that?" Izzy asked, dropping her hands down to her sides. "Don't you realize that if I wore a certain type of clothing that fit quite nicely and revealed my assets, I may actually distract the Royal Navy lord and you can get him to agree to whatever you want?"

"David Shield is not that daft," Johnny said, his eyes narrowing a fraction at her suggestion. "And that is exactly the reason I do not want you coming with me. David Shield is a man who, when he sees something he wants, has every desire to get it, no matter the cost. And when he spots you, he will most certainly want you. And

I'll be damned if I let him take you."

If Izzy wasn't arguing about something she saw as important, she would allow the flattery she felt at Johnny's words to sink into her psyche. But she was arguing for something important, and suddenly, she got an idea. "How about this, then?" she began as she felt her posture straighten with this new surge of confidence. "If you let me accompany you to this parley, then I absolutely promise that I won't fight."

Johnny chuckled lowly. "Even if you wanted to fight, you couldn't," he told her. "I wouldn't allow it."

"Of course you'd say something like that," Izzy murmured, but she didn't seem thrown. In fact, she was almost pleased he had said something along those lines. "However, you won't be around to watch me, will you? You'll be fighting, as will everyone else. I could sneak out if I wanted to and you'd have no way of knowing."

"You wouldn't *dare*," Johnny warned, feeling his body start to seethe.

Izzy arched a brow up, almost as though to say "Wouldn't I?" "If you let me accompany you, I won't leave your room," she told him.

Before Johnny could answer, somebody knocked halfheartedly on the door before barging in. It was Pimms, his dark gray eyes wide with worry. "It's Shield, captain!" the man exclaimed, his tenor piercing the air sharper than Izzy imagined it could. "He's docked by the bank and ready for the parley."

Johnny nodded gravely at Pimms. "Get O'Malley," he told the scrawny pirate. "I want him to be my second-in-command." Pimms nodded and closed the door before Johnny threw eyes over at Izzy. He stared at her for what seemed like a long portion of time before Johnny finally relented. "Fine," he said, his voice low. "But you're not allowed to wear anything too revealing or call attention to yourself in any way. In fact, you're not allowed to speak, all right?"

Izzy didn't exactly agree, but she nodded a couple of times before deciding to change. She left Johnny's room and went into the one next door, where most of her clothing was stored. She grabbed a simple blue tunic and black breeches, before slipping on her boots. Instead of pulling her hair up, she decided to leave it long. If Johnny wouldn't allow her to speak, then she could at least reveal her gender in another way. Once she had finished, she was ready.

It was almost like being in a movie. It reminded Izzy of the old Wild West movies her grandfather would watch with her when she was younger. Johnny was in the center, the Irish Representative O'Malley was on his right, and Izzy was on his left. Ahead of the pirates on the sandbank were three men, coming towards them. From the way he walked, Izzy assumed that the man in the middle was Lord David Shield, head of the Royal Navy. He had jet black hair and piercing sapphire eyes that reminded Izzy of ice cubes. The corners of his thin lips were curled into an arrogant smirk, but unlike Johnny's usual grin, Shield's had no charm to make it attractive. However, the man was well-built, with more muscle than Johnny. Despite this, Izzy was certain Johnny was smarter and faster, so while it seemed as though Shield had the advantage, Johnny really had an ace up his sleeve.

"Well," a crisp, cool voice said once the two groups stopped a few feet away from each other. "Here we are, albeit a few weeks late." He threw his icy gaze at Johnny, but Johnny didn't seem disturbed by the intensity of the man's stare. "Now, what is the reason for this parley?"

"We wish to convey our desire to once again ask that we not fight this battle," Johnny said smoothly. He had been thinking a lot about what he was to say, wishing to sound more confident than he felt at present.

"You do not have to fight, but that does not mean we will withdraw," Shield said, the smirk slipping onto his face once again. "Pirates die either way, Johnny Clover, and I really was hoping to actually have some fun with the challenge you think you present us. But a dead man is still a dead man; it does not matter how he dies. So if you and your men would like to form rows, we can practice our shooting."

Johnny forced a charismatic smile onto his face, though it clearly did not reach his eyes. "I am so sorry to disappoint you, David Shield, but my men are willing to give their lives for what they believe in," he told the man. "Are yours?"

"If it means wiping pirate scum like you off of the face of the planet, then yes, they are all willing to die for the greater good," Shield replied, and then added in a tart tone, "And it's *Lord* David Shield."

“Of course,” Johnny amended. “And it’s *Captain* Johnny Clover. So,” he began, changing the subject and cocking his head slightly to the side. “Since battle is imminent, we need to sort out the ground rules so we play fair.”

“All’s fair in war,” Shield said with that smirk of his. Izzy realized she furrowed her brow every time it decorated his face, not pleased with its presence whatsoever. “But since you pirates are all but barbarians, it is probably wise to have some sort of structure over this, hmm?” He narrowed his eyes suddenly at Johnny, his whole careless demeanor disappearing completely. “We fight to the death, *Captain* Clover. There is no such thing as surrendering. And whichever side is still alive by the time it’s all over are the winners.” He paused here, and looked at Johnny levelly. “You know that this does not mean piracy will suddenly be legal if, on the off chance, you cheat and happen to win.”

“If it were legal,” Johnny pointed out. “It wouldn’t be as much fun.” He glanced over at O’Malley for a long moment, before the Irishman nodded cryptically. “The rules are set and agreed upon. If it works for you, I suggest we fight at dawn, on the sea, of course.”

“Dawn it is,” Shield agreed. “Oh, and Captain, I should probably tell you now so I’m being fair... It is I who will take the life from you. You will die by my hand, and no one else’s.”

Izzy’s mouth fell slightly ajar when she realized Johnny was amused by his statement.

“We’ll see about that,” was all Johnny would say before turning around to face both O’Malley and Izzy, and the three started heading back. “Let’s head back to the ship then. O’Malley, tell everyone what transpired here. Get your men ready. Get everyone ready. We cannot be late. We cannot let them win.”

Without thinking about it, Izzy slipped her hand in Johnny’s. The simple gesture took Johnny by surprise, and he glanced down at the young woman, offering her a simple smile. Though he squeezed Izzy’s hand gently in order to reassure her, the young woman was not relieved.

Not in the slightest.

It was about an hour before dawn, or at least, that's what Izzy assumed as she peered out the window from the captain's quarters. Currently, she was lying on her back, her head facing the window as it rested comfortably on Johnny's shoulder, his arm around her waist. She was fully clothed, and nothing intimate had transpired between them the previous night, but Izzy needed to be close to him before he left to fight, and though Johnny wouldn't admit it aloud, he needed her close to him as well. Her mind was frantic with worry, wishing that time would freeze and they could stay this way forever, no fighting—no risking his life for the greater good, just the two of them in each other's arms. But no. This battle had to happen and as such, Johnny had to leave her. She just hoped he came back.

"Remember what you promised," came a mumbled voice from beside her. Izzy refocused her eyes on the pirate beside her, his eyes still shut. There were times when he would read her like a book, as though he could see through her. It amazed her how he knew she wasn't sleeping when his eyes were closed.

Then his words sank in, and she freely rolled her eyes, a dry look touching her features. "How could I forget?" she asked.

Though Johnny's eyes were still shut, the corners of his lips turned up. He was amused. "You know it's for your own good, darling," he murmured before yawning silently and opening his eyes. The first thing he saw was her face, the worry written so clearly in her eyes. "How lucky am I, to be waking up to you this morning."

Izzy looked away. She was so consumed in her thoughts that she didn't even blush at his flattering words. "I wish you wouldn't speak like that," she told him. She paused, and Johnny could tell she was struggling with something she needed to say. He turned towards her, propping his elbow on his pillow and cradling his head in the palm of his hand, remaining silent so Izzy could say everything she needed to say. "Look, I don't know if this is going to come out the way I mean it to; I'm known for saying things and they just come

out wrong and people take offense at it when I didn't even mean it that way." Johnny's lips curled up once more as she rambled on, unable to look him in the eyes just yet. "I know that you *have* to go and do this and save piracy from extinction and whatnot, but I don't *want* you to go." When she finished, she finally looked him in the eyes, hoping that he wasn't affronted by what she had said.

In fact, Johnny was anything but. He remained mute for a long moment, simply staring at the woman in front of him, his eyes trying to memorize every inch of her face. Finally, he reached out and curled an errant strand of hair behind her ear, a tiny smile touching his lips at he looked at her with adoration.

"You know," he began, his voice low, his tone serious, "that I've never had anybody worry about where I've been or what I've done or who I was with. I used to believe that it would be quite annoying, having to explain every action I did to somebody, and every reason why I did it. I know that I don't have to do that with you, darling, but out of all the people in the world, I would choose to do so with you. I like the fact that you're concerned about me. It means a lot, knowing that you care for somebody like me."

Johnny swallowed, unsure where he was going with this line of speech, but somewhere deep inside of him urged him to continue. Johnny had never been daft; he knew that he was mortal, just like every person in the world, and that there was a good chance he would die in the impending battle. If he didn't get this off his chest now, he may never have the chance to. "You're the only person I trust, Isabelle," he continued, his voice even softer than before as his hand cupped her cheek. "And I know this may sound selfish, but I am glad that I got you not only in your world, but in mine as well." He smiled now, completely amused with the situation at hand. "You know, I never thought I would ever say this to another person, but I realize that as I'm about to, it will probably be the easiest three words I ever say. I want you to know that everything I said about love—I realize it wasn't true. It couldn't be true because I—"

Before Johnny could finish what he was about to say, Izzy reached out and placed her hand over his lips. Johnny cocked a questioning brow, wondering why she had wanted him to stop talking when she had to have known what he was going to say.

"No," she whispered, almost desperately as her eyes filled with tears. "No. Don't say that yet. You tell me after this war, after you

have finished. Then you can tell me anything you want. But not now.” She pushed her brow up as a tear rolled down her cheek before finally releasing his mouth, letting her hand drop carelessly to the bed. “What you can say,” she continued, swallowing a bit before looking him in the eyes. “What you can promise is that you’ll come back to me. I came back to you, remember? And I’ll always come back to you.”

“Of course I’ll come back to you,” Johnny said, frowning when he saw another tear roll down Izzy’s cheeks. He reached out and caught them with his tongue. “I promise you that no matter where I am, my beating heart belongs to you, darling.”

Izzy bit her lip in order to keep her tears in check. She didn’t want Johnny to see her crying as the last thing he remembered. Instead, she flung her arms around his neck and pulled him close to her, burying her face against his chest. If only they had a little bit longer. If only the Royal Navy hadn’t demanded the extinction of piracy. If only, if only, if only...

Johnny held her in his arms for as long as time would permit. However, when he saw the first ray of sunlight start to cascade against the night sky, he leaned his head down and whispered, “It’s time to go, love.”

Izzy frowned, her lips pushing out into a pout as she sat up. She looked so utterly adorable that Johnny couldn’t help but chuckle at her face, wanting nothing more than to reach out and kiss her. But now was definitely not the time. He had to concentrate on the impending battle; distractions could cost him his life, and while he dearly loved Izzy, she was most definitely a distraction. Johnny pushed himself off the bed and stretched before rummaging around for some clothes.

While Johnny changed, Izzy kept her focus on the headboard. She had turned around in order to give Johnny some privacy, and it wasn’t until she heard him slipping on his boots did she realize he had finished, and that time was slipping too fast for her taste.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” she asked him, pressing her brows together as she regarded him with big eyes.

Johnny nodded, before standing up and sheathing his cutlass. “Of course, darling,” he said. “You don’t have to worry, my love. I know my way around a blade.”

“Like that’s going to keep me from worrying,” Izzy snapped as she slid off of the bed. She walked over to stand in front of Johnny,

her arms crossed over her chest, as she regarded him for a long moment. Then, without warning, she stood on her toes and enveloped Johnny into a hug as she placed her lips tenderly onto his. Johnny was slightly taken aback only because it was usually he who initiated the kisses, the caresses, but at the moment, he didn't think too much about it. Instead, he closed his eyes and tilted her head back so he could kiss her more passionately than he ever had, hoping to show her how much he loved her without actually saying it.

Izzy wasn't sure how long the kiss lasted, but she knew that it didn't last long enough. When it was necessary to break apart due to the lack of oxygen, Johnny rested his hands on her hips.

"You'll remember your promise, won't you?" he asked her, his tone revealing only slightly that he was breathless.

"I will," she agreed, nodding once, "just as long as you remember yours."

Johnny didn't say anything, but he nodded, and pulled her into his arms again. He held her for too short a time before finally releasing her.

"I have to go," he murmured. He looked at her one last time before turning on his heel and heading outside.

How long had she been sitting there? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember when Johnny had left her. She couldn't remember when the clashing of the cutlasses rang out, or when she felt the ground and the walls vibrate around her due to the fighting that was taking place outside. She was curled into the corner of the room, her knees pressed as close to her chest as she could possibly get them, her arms hugging them to her chest, and her face buried in a red tunic of Johnny's. Tears stained not only her cheeks, but the material as well, and time had passed so quickly she couldn't recall when she had started crying or when she had stopped because she *couldn't* anymore. Occasionally, her eyes would glance out the window placed directly across from her in order to see the color of the sky. At present, it was a sharp sky blue, which meant it had to be some time in the afternoon. There were times when she saw the Navy fighting the pirates, and she immediately looked away, feeling guilt reach up and squeeze her heart.

Izzy had promised Johnny she wouldn't leave his cabin no matter what. And she really had every intention to keep such a promise. But as she sat there, completely isolated from the screams that rung out outside, she felt so...useless. It wasn't as though she didn't know how to handle a blade. Johnny had taught her how to handle a blade, and while Izzy didn't consider herself as talented as he was, she wasn't exactly a pushover. Granted, she wasn't as strong as the weakest men out there, but she was quick.

And she could help.

Izzy tilted her chin up so now it was resting on the caps of her knees. Her weary eyes glanced out the window, and found that it was still in the afternoon, but it wasn't as bright out. Maybe three o'clock? Four? Who knew anymore? Her eyes shifted over to a cutlass hanging on the wall adjacent to the window, just begging Izzy to take it. To join the fight with the other men to prove, to show that she wasn't just some woman, some pirate's whore. She wanted to show that she could hold her own, that she could *help*. And, more than anything in the world, she thought that maybe she

could protect Johnny.

She knew it was a silly thought, but it was something she had to hold onto.

Izzy was the type of person who believed that everything happened for a reason. There had to be a reason why she fell into Johnny's world. Maybe it wasn't showing him how to fall in love, like she had originally thought. Maybe it was saving his life.

Was Johnny even alive?

How could she even think such a thing? Though the thought had caught her off-guard, it didn't go away as she had hoped. What if he was lying somewhere, people tripping and stepping on him, bleeding to death? What if he was pushed overboard, into a sea filled with hungry sharks just waiting to catch a whiff of blood? What if—?

And she was just sitting there?

If Johnny was alive, then she would make this up to him later. If she survived it, of course. But she wasn't as concerned with her survival as she was with Johnny's. He was a savior of sorts, for crying out loud.

Without thinking, she pushed herself up, letting the tunic slip from her grasp and fall unceremoniously to the ground. She walked over to the wall and plucked the cutlass from its holder before staring at the door. She knew she should stay, but even if she had wanted to, the decision was already made for her. This was a promise she was going to have to break.

When she rushed out of the cabin, she immediately took in as much of her environment as she possibly could without making herself an obvious target for any Navy man. Her eyes recognized the sky's musky color—it was probably pushing five o'clock now. The screams and clanging of metal on metal and the shots being fired from pistols, she managed to block out. Her sole intent was to find Johnny, and to find him as fast as she could. She turned around, catching sight of another ship a couple of feet from this one, and frowned. It was then that she realized there was more than one ship involved in the fight, which meant there was more than one ship Johnny could be on. And if that was the case, how would she try and find him when he could be on any of them? In fact, how would she get across to another ship?

As subtly as Izzy could make herself, she started walking around the ship, taking care to avoid any and all eye contact, as well as

watching the men fight, literally, to the death. A couple of times, the stench on the ship caused Izzy to stop walking and grab her stomach; if she didn't force herself to remain as calm as possible, her stomach could easily push up the contents it had already digested. She realized something, then. This wasn't a movie where the gory parts weren't looked upon; this was real life. Men from both sides were dying all around her—Hell, she could die right now if she wasn't careful.

She needed to find Johnny as quickly as possible. Her eyes scanned as many of the people as possible on the ship, but found that he wasn't there.

Okay, this doesn't mean he's dead, Izzy tried to reassure herself. It just means that he's not on this ship.

Luckily for the young woman, nobody noticed her. Her frame was smaller than usual, and she wasn't trying to attack either side, so the men all but ignored her. Another lucky break for Izzy was the fact that she could clearly make out the inhabitants of the ships across the way. However, she could only make them out on one side. So...how to get over?

It was then she heard a scream coming from up above. The young woman glanced up, her mouth literally falling open when she saw a man (she couldn't make out what side he was on) swing across the gap between ships on a rope that originally meant to guide the sails. When he landed, he crumpled to the floor. Before the rope could head back to the side, Izzy managed to grab it. She needed to plan this as best as she could; she couldn't fall short or she would miss the ship, and she couldn't go too far or else she'd go past it. Her measurements had to be perfect.

"The *one* time math comes in handy," she muttered to herself, before coiling her other hand on the rough exterior.

Izzy glanced behind her, and when she saw the path was somewhat clear, started to back up. She could feel her hands sweating, and hoped with all her might that her grip would be strong enough to hold onto the rope until she reached the ship. She quickly said a quiet prayer and then started to run with the rope until she couldn't run anymore. With a squeak, she coiled her body around it as best as she could as she flew across the sea. Her heart leapt into her throat when she made it to the ship. Knowing it would no doubt hurt, Izzy braced herself before letting go and falling a couple of feet until she landed on her backside. She let out

a frustrated moan, but like the other ship, nobody paid her any attention. In fact, she was starting to get annoyed at the fact.

Up until the point when she noticed Johnny.

He was fighting someone she was unfamiliar with—no one from the parley yesterday. His chocolate brown eyes were fierce, determined, and though some portions of his shirt were stained red, he seemed to be all right. Izzy clapped her hands together once, before covering the lower half of her face with them. She was so happy she could cry. She hadn't realized just how worried she had been about him until that very moment.

Of course he would be alive. *Of course* he would! How could she ever doubt that?

A sharp movement behind Johnny cut her happiness short, however.

It was that man—David Shield—the one who was supposedly in charge of the entire Navy fleet. Izzy took a step forward before narrowing her eyes, trying to see what he was doing. Inside, her stomach churned. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Then she saw the pistol.

Izzy didn't even have to think. She couldn't even breathe. Everything fell into blackness around her; she noticed nothing in her current environment. All she could see was the pistol pointed at Johnny. She screamed Johnny's name, but couldn't hear it, and then, she pushed herself in front of the pirate just as Shield fired his shot.

Johnny managed to reach out and catch Izzy before her body crumpled to the floor. She had been shot in the left side of her chest, but oddly enough, she had yet to make a sound. No squeak of surprise, no cry of pain. Johnny's eyes were on Izzy and Izzy alone as his knees gave out and he slowly fell down. When he could no longer stare at the young woman in his arms, his eyes shot upwards in hopes to meet the man who had shot at him. He growled when he locked onto David Shield, who, though surprised at what had transpired, didn't seem completely affected by the outcome of events.

"Well, you're still alive," he snipped as his eyes traveled down to look at Izzy with an enigmatic expression on his face. "I guess we all have our aces up our sleeves, hmm?" He perked his brow and regarded Johnny with a look that could only be described as taunting.

Those in battle surrounding the pirate captain and the navy lord all stopped fighting as they looked at the fallen woman. Even the Navy men had sympathy pooling in their eyes, while some willingly gave Shield a dark look. They seemed to have come to the realization Shield was going to shoot Johnny in the back, and had it not been for the young woman, most probably would have succeeded in doing just that. Even such an action against a powerful man was deemed cowardly among both types of men.

Johnny gritted his teeth at Shield and the words he had spoken, completely ignoring everyone and everything around him. Without thinking twice, he reached in his holster and whipped out his pistol before firing a fatal shot at the lord. Shield staggered back, his face contorted into surprise, and without another word, dropped to his knees, painfully bleeding out.

Johnny didn't even spare the fallen man a second glance. Once again his eyes were consumed with only Izzy. As carefully as he could, he lifted his fingers and checked her pulse. Relief washed over him when he realized that she was still breathing, still alive, though the pulse was not beating as rapidly as it normally should.

Finally finding strength, he pushed himself up into a standing position and glanced around. He had to get Izzy medical attention as quickly as possible.

“Over here, sir,” a man, clearly from the Navy, suggested, gesturing to where the captain’s quarters was.

Johnny eyed the man warily, unsure if he should trust the lad or not.

“You have beaten us,” another Navy man said, stepping forward to look at Johnny. “That was the agreement, was it not? Fighting to the death between you and Lord Shield. You have won.”

“Of course this does not mean that piracy is suddenly legal,” the first man said. “But since you have clearly and justly won this battle, I can promise you and your men safe passage to get off of our ships and leave, provided, of course, that they agree to stand down.”

“It is agreed,” Johnny said, nodding his head almost cryptically. His voice came out in a monotone, completely unlike how he normally spoke. Detached. As though he wasn’t there. “Just...” He looked down helplessly at Izzy, his eyes narrowing at the blood stain increasing. “Help her. *Save her.*”

“This way, sir,” the second man said, and turned, leading Johnny to the captain’s quarters. “My name is Cyprus, sir, and I can guarantee you we have the best medical aid money can buy.” He opened the door so Johnny could enter, and the pirate captain immediately set Izzy down on the luxurious bed. “I shall go and get the physician.” With that, the man closed the door in order to give the two some privacy, but Johnny took no notice.

“Johnny?” she croaked, trying to open her eyes. Izzy couldn’t believe the searing pain she was currently experiencing, but she felt that she could deal with it if she knew Johnny was all right.

“I’m here, darling,” Johnny said, his voice cracking slightly as he looked down at her. He reached up and pushed stray strands of golden hair from her face as his eyes blurred with unshed tears.

Izzy smiled at this, pleased that she managed to get to him in time. Her breathing hitched; it was getting so hard to breathe.... “I just...,” she tried to say, before shutting her eyes and then opening them once again, trying to focus on Johnny. It was hard when things were so blurry. “I just wanted to tell...you...I—”

Johnny immediately placed his finger on her lips, preventing her from finishing the sentence. “Don’t talk like that, love,” he said,

trying his damndest to keep his voice steady. "You can say anything you'd like when you get better."

Izzy nodded, shutting her eyes once again. She was so tired....

"Promise me you'll come back to me, Isabelle," Johnny said suddenly, his face paling at the thought she might not make it through this. "Promise me."

Izzy opened her eyes halfway and another smile touched her lips. "I always come back to you," she said, her voice sounding far-off and tired. "I promise." With that her eyes shut and she was immediately pulled into a hazy sleep.

Blackness surrounded Izzy at that moment, and oddly enough, she was standing, completely fine. Her surroundings looked like nothingness, and she was all alone. Her eyes searched for some kind of movement, trying desperately to find Johnny. Where was she? Had she died? Was this the afterlife? Purgatory?

"You are not yet dead," a familiar, flowy voice said, and right before her eyes, the fortune teller from before came into view. "My name is Willow. I am sure you remember me reading your fortune in your time about your importance when it comes to Johnny Clover. As I'm sure you can see, you were a very important piece for Johnny's survival. But not only that, Johnny would not have led these pirates into battle had it not been for you."

Izzy furrowed her brow at the comment. "Me?" she asked, completely baffled. "How could I have possibly encouraged him to do this? I don't even remember talking to him about it, really. In fact, somewhere inside of me, I didn't *want* him to do it...."

Willow smiled enigmatically. "No," she agreed, "but you inspired him. Before, Johnny Clover did not believe in anything, not even himself. And then he fell into your world. I must say, I was not expecting him to fall in love with you so quickly, but I am glad for it. You give him hope, Isabelle. And with hope comes courage to do something one would never dream of doing."

"That's a lot of pressure," Izzy murmured with slight unease.

"Which is why you did not know about it," Willow told her. "It was also imperative that Johnny believe you could disappear from him at any moment. You inspired him, Isabelle. Pirates all over the world should be thanking you."

"That's really all right," the young woman said, clearly uncomfortable with what the redhead was telling her.

Willow chuckled at this, her laughter melodious and

mesmerizing. "It amazes me that Johnny Clover had the capacity to fall in love," she said, "though I knew he could. But what baffles me even more is the fact that you could love someone like him, even with his numerous flaws."

"I love him *for* his flaws," Izzy corrected her without even thinking. When she realized what she had said, she blushed and looked away. "So," she said, deciding to change the subject. "You said I wasn't dead. Then where am I?" She managed to turn her head and lock eyes with the psychic.

"You are in a time gap," Willow said.

"Why am I here?" Izzy wondered aloud, her eyes still baffled by the darkness.

"Because I am going to give you a choice," the woman explained. "A choice that cannot be revoked once made. Because of your part in this battle between the pirates and the Navy, I want to give you a gift. You were born in a different time and yet you fell into this one. I know you have strong feelings for Johnny Clover but I also know you have people you care about back home. We both know you cannot hop from one time to the other whenever you choose. But I do not wish to send you back to where you belong if that is not where you long to be. Would you like to stay here, with Johnny, or would you like to return home?"

It didn't take very long for Izzy to make her decision, which surprised Izzy somewhat. She always thought it would be difficult to make sure a life-changing decision, but oddly enough, the words slipped out of her mouth as though she was meant to say them.

"I want to stay with Johnny."

Willow smiled as though she knew that was what Izzy would say. And maybe she did.

"So be it."

White light started to blind Izzy, and before she knew it, the young woman was back in her body. In pain, but where she felt she truly belonged.

Epilogue

Izzy could hear the music and the chattering down below and softly smiled to herself in the mirror. She was currently sitting at a desk, trying to figure out how to do her hair for tonight's ball celebrating the pirates' win in the battle against the Navy, but she didn't feel that passionate about it. To be completely honest, she was tired, ready for bed. It had been three days since the fateful night when she had chosen to remain with Johnny rather than return home, but they hadn't really spoken about love, and Izzy hadn't told him she wouldn't slip away from him. She pursed her lips, cocking her head slightly to the side, and wondered if maybe she imagined Johnny having feelings for her. Wouldn't he have said something when she had woken up?

But he didn't. And when he realized she hadn't been wounded from the bullet, he realized it was Willow's doing. That meant that the two had spoken, which meant she *could* leave at any moment. There was no point then, was there, telling her he loved her, if she was just going to return to the New World. So Johnny had kept his lips together, and settled back, as though he was waiting for her to leave him.

Izzy realized he was pushing her away, and the thought hurt. After everything they had been through together, after everything he had accomplished with her supporting him from the sidelines, how could he simply—?

"Why the frown?" a familiar French drawl asked from the door frame. Izzy was so consumed in her thoughts, she hadn't even heard Marion open her bedroom door. She glanced over at the older madam, and forced the corners of her lips up. Marion immediately tut-tutted her, closing the door behind her, and headed into the room. "Even I can tell that is a fake one. Why so sad?"

"This whole thing with Johnny," Izzy said, deciding to confide in the older woman. She turned in her chair so she was facing the brunette, and sighed. "Right before he left for battle, I could have sworn he was going to tell me that he loved me, but I stopped him because I felt the only reason he was going to say it was because he

thought he might die. But if he didn't, then, at least to me, it meant that he knew he was coming back, and he could say it when he did. But it's been a few days, and he hasn't said a word."

"You must give Johnny Clover some time," Marion said, her voice ever-knowing, especially when it came to that particular pirate. "He has never really confessed such a thing to anyone, you know. Maybe he's waiting for the...oh, how you say, the opportune moment."

Izzy smiled at that, recalling the famous line from her favorite movie.

"Ah!" Marion exclaimed, pointing teasingly at the blonde in front of her. "There's a real smile. You realize just how late you are for this celebration? I mean, look at you! *Mon dieu*. Come, come; you're only in your under dress. Now where is the gown I gave to you? Tonight would be an excellent night to wear it. It will not only be Johnny's eyes on you tonight, and maybe competition is the push that pirate needs to see just who he has in front of him."

Izzy smiled. Marion sort of reminded her of Bex, or at least, she cheered her up just like her redheaded friend had. Izzy couldn't help the excitement that rushed through her veins when Marion offered to help her get ready. In fact, it gave her renewed confidence, and she felt that she was actually looking forward to going to the ball.

It took a good hour, which surprised Marion herself, but Marion was fast and skillful. She knew exactly how she wanted Izzy to look, even when it came to Izzy's hair and her face. Half of her hair was twisted and pinned to the top of her head in an intricate design that resembled a labyrinth, while the rest of her hair fell down her back into soft waves. Marion kept Izzy's face natural-looking for the most part, not only because Izzy seemed to prefer it that way, but because the madam knew Johnny did too. Even when he was one of her customers, he'd preferred natural beauties, rather than fake ones.

It was the dress, however, that caused Izzy to give pause. She didn't think that it was possible she could look this beautiful, but Marion seemed to think so. Somehow, she had found the exact color that emphasized Izzy's eyes, so they stood out even more than they did already. The bodice was smooth cut across her chest in a round shape. The sleeves fell off of her shoulders loosely, and the skirt fit her shape rather than poofing out. On her feet were small heels, and

there was a small white necklace that drew attention to her bare skin. It reminded her of the dress Taylor Swift had worn in “Love Story.”

“Are you ready?” Marion asked as she backed up to give the young woman in front of her a good look. “Because you look ready.”

Izzy smiled shyly, but nodded a couple of times, and followed the madam out the door.

* * *

Johnny frowned as his eyes swept across the ballroom once again, trying in vain to lay eyes on the woman he had been waiting for. Many women had approached them and asked him for a dance, and he obliged them, but his eyes were always searching. And nobody had yet to sway him into not looking for her.

Though he had told himself it didn’t matter whether or not he loved her—Izzy would be leaving soon—he desperately wanted to see her, to hold her closely to him....

He was dancing with another nameless woman when he found her. She was following Marion down the steps of her brothel and looked so stunning he couldn’t help but pause in the middle of the dance. He didn’t notice the woman scowling at him, didn’t care that he was the only unmoving person on the floor. In fact, he didn’t even care that his heart appeared to have stopped just taking her in. Without fully comprehending it, his feet began to lead him in her direction. He had to be in her proximity. He had to be near her, or he would absolutely go mad.

Johnny managed to reach the staircase just as Izzy had finished descending. She paused upon seeing him; he looked just as he had at the ball, the same hairstyle, the same suit—everything. Her heart skipped just seeing him looking at her with an enigmatic expression in those dark eyes of his.

“Dance with me?” he asked, though it sounded more like a statement rather than a question.

She took his offered hand, knowing that even if she had wanted to, she couldn’t refuse. Not those eyes.

“You look...,” Johnny began, but then stopped, realizing just how impossible it was for him to actually describe her.

Izzy blushed slightly, biting her bottom lip before saying, "You do, too."

He led her gracefully onto the dance floor. Like Marion had said, many of the men that were there couldn't seem to take their eyes off of Izzy. While Johnny pointedly acknowledged the attention, Izzy didn't even seem to notice. It would seem she only had eyes for the man in front of her.

As they started to dance to the slow song the orchestra was playing, the couple remained silent. It felt good just being in his arms, while Johnny reveled in the feeling of her.

"I was worried about you, you know," he told her suddenly, his voice soft and low, causing goose bumps to spring everywhere across her body. "I thought you promised you wouldn't leave my quarters." He arched a brow, slightly upset she hadn't listened to him, but couldn't exactly be angry with her when she was unharmed and alive.

"If I hadn't, you wouldn't have kept your promise," she murmured, looking up at him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked suddenly, furrowing her brow. "Why did you save me?"

"Because I love you," she told him. The words were easier to say than she had originally anticipated, and she smiled when she realized a heavy burden had been taken off of her shoulders. "I couldn't imagine my life without you, so I...I chose to stay here. With you." She winced slightly, hoping she hadn't been too presumptuous. "I hope you aren't upset."

Before Izzy could react, Johnny gently cupped her cheek in his rough hand and gently tilted her head back in order to softly brush his lips across hers. The action took Izzy by such surprise that she didn't even have time to react.

"Of course I'm not upset," he told her, pulling the young woman even closer. "I could never be mad at you." He cocked his head to the side, his eyes still not quiet believing. "So you are to stay with me? You will not disappear."

"I won't disappear," Izzy told him with a smile.

Johnny smiled brilliantly. "That's excellent news, darling," Johnny said. "In fact, to celebrate, I think we should get married."

Izzy laughed at the idea. "Johnny, you haven't even told me you loved me, and now you want to get married?" she asked in disbelief. "Don't you think we should take things slowly?"

“Of course, of course,” the pirate agreed. “And I know just where to start.” He leaned towards her suddenly, cocking his head to the side slightly, and for a moment, Izzy thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, Johnny smiled down at her, a sparkle springing into his eyes. “I love you too,” he breathed in a husky voice. “And I think I always will. So then. Marriage?”

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Thank you SO much and I look forward to your feedback!

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this was the first pirate novel I've written, and it spiraled from there. I promised myself I would write a good one – with more than just sex and romance, and I feel I've accomplished that with this book. So thank YOU for downloading it, taking a chance, and reading it. It means so, so much to me.

To all the readers and reviewers on Fictionpress, you've given me the courage to pursue my dreams. I'm so grateful for your support.

To my mom

To my brother

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To my husband, who gives me insight and inspiration, and teaches me to be a better person. Thank you. I love you.

To my muse

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